# EXCURSIONS IN CRITICISM

BEING SOME PROSE RECREATIONS
OF A RHYMER

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THAT THIS LITTLE VOLUME MAY BE GRACED WITH THE NAME OF ONE OF THE TRUEST OF POETS AND MOST MAGNANIMOUS OF MEN I VENTURE TO INSCRIBE IT, WITH APOLOGIES FOR SO POOR AN OFFERING,

TO

GEORGE MEREDITH

THE articles in this volume have already appeared in the *National Review*, the *Spectator*, the *Illustrated London News*, the *Academy*, the *Bookman*, and *Atalanta*, to the editors of which periodicals my thanks are due for courteous permission to reprint.

W. W.

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# EXCURSIONS IN CRITICISM

## SOME LITERARY IDOLATRIES

EXAGGERATION is often picturesque; and Mr Swinburne's phrase, describing Dekker and Webster as 'gulfs or estuaries of the sea which is Shakespeare,' is as picturesque as Landor's very different verdict, in which Shakespeare's dramatic contemporaries are scornfully dismissed as the mushrooms that sprang up about the roots of the oak of Arden. Landor's extreme and undoubtedly sincere disparagement of the 'old dramatists' cannot with plausibility be referred to the mere prejudices of a bigoted classicist, for although in theory his classical prepossessions may have approached the verge of bigotry, in practice they did not hinder him from heartily appreciating much that was at variance with his severe ideals. His 'paganism,' his 'Atticism,' his utter inability to

apprehend the mood and temper of the mystic, were yet no barrier to the essential justness of his estimate of Dante. His passion for symmetry, grace, and formal finish, did not preclude a genuine admiration of Browning. From Webster and Dekker—from those 'gulfs or estuaries of the sea which is Shakespeare'—he would have turned in disgust; but on that sea itself, alike in its tranquil or its stormy moods, he never wearied of setting sail. Whence, then, his violent aversion from that tragic fraternity whom a modern school of criticism proclaims as kinsmen of Shakespeare not far removed in blood? It is safe to presume that if he had been questioned as to the real grounds of his heresy, he would have replied in effect that the Elizabethan playwrights, those especially whom it is now the fashion to exalt on the score of peculiarly poetic endowment, painted such a lurid and chaotic world as he for one cared not to set foot in. 'Let drama,' he might conceivably have said, 'show me men and women in great situations, heroically doing and enduring; but deliver me from the society of Ford's enamoured brother and sister, and spare me the spectacle of Webster's tortured Duchess.'

'Webster,' one can fancy him exclaiming, 'Webster, an arm of the sea which is Shake-

speare! Rather a sunless Acheron, with the wailing ghosts huddled upon its banks.'

Before Lamb's time the contumely which had overwhelmed the extra-Shakespearian drama of Elizabeth and James was chequered by a half-conventional respect for Ben Jonson, Massinger, and the dual personality of Beaumont and Fletcher. Jonson, with his firm foothold in classic learning and his solid constructive power; Massinger, with his lucid, equable, restrained, orderly manner, never rising to greatness, but seldom degenerating into fustian or puffed into bombast, were naturally spared the doom which had overtaken the more erratic and fiery of their brethren. After the Restoration, Beaumont and Fletcher's plays seem to have been, in point of popularity, the chief salvage from the general wreck of the Elizabethan period. Dryden is so good as to inform us that these authors 'understood and imitated the conversation of gentlemen much better than Shakespeare'; and he proceeds to observe that 'the English language in them arrived to its highest perfection. Their plays,' he says, 'are now the most pleasant and frequent entertainments of the stage, two of theirs being acted through the year for one of Shakespeare's or Jonson's; the reason is, because

there is a certain gaiety in their comedies and pathos in their more serious plays which suits generally with all men's humours. Shakespeare's language is likewise a little obsolete, and Ben Jonson's wit comes short of theirs.' And so, having survived the fame of most of their compeers, these graceful collaborators continued intermittently to keep the stage, and at the end of the last century their names at least remained vaguely great upon men's lips. But with the present century came a race of critics who announced with much originality and power that the most potent spirits of the old drama were not Jonson with his laborious art, nor Massinger with his surefooted style, nor Beaumont and Fletcher with their decorative fancy and lyrical grace, but Marlowe of the 'mighty line,' and Webster of the sombre imagination, and Dekker and Middleton and Tourneur and Ford.

The most exquisitely gifted of these critics, Charles Lamb, was fired with all the zeal of a discoverer. In many instances he absurdly exaggerated the fertility and beauty of his new-found land, but much must be pardoned to the pioneer. With adventurers who first look down into an unmapped world from a 'peak in Darien,' the immediate impulse is to gaze and marvel

rather than accurately observe. To Lamb and Hazlitt the work of the forgotten dramatists was a region of indescribable glamour and enchantment; and no wonder, for of them and their immediate associates we may say that

> 'They were the first that ever burst
> Into that silent sea.'

And some of their verdicts are not likely to be annulled or much modified. Marlowe is a case in point. As the real founder, though not precisely the initiator, both of English tragedy and English blank verse—as being thus in a certain sense the father of our poetry more truly than even Chaucer, for Chaucer's direct influence upon Shakespeare and Milton is not great, while Marlowe's unquestionably is—the immense importance of his position can scarcely be overstated. And it is not merely a relative or historical importance either. Judged upon their absolute merits as poetry, such passages as those in which Faustus addresses the apparition of Helen, disclose by their magnificence of hyperbole a power of style belonging to the great poets alone. His imagination is of wide sweep, with an adventurous, intrepid, and untamable wing. Violent, sinister, rebellious, unblest, he has something of

the grandeur of a fallen angel about him, and in the dayspring of our drama he is Lucifer, son of the morning. We need not go the absurd lengths to which Leigh Hunt's enthusiasm carried that genial, and only too impressionable critic, as when, in his *Imagination and Fancy*, a sort of poetic *Baedeker* or Tourist's Guide to Parnassus, he discovered the prototype of Milton's passages of glorified nomenclature in the following not very remarkable lines from the *Jew of Malta*:

> 'Mine Argosies from Alexandria,
> Laden with spice and fruits, now under sail,
> Are smoothly gliding down by Candy shore,
> To Malta, through our Mediterranean Sea.'

But in spite of admirers given to admiring in the wrong place, in spite also of a later school of incontinent critics whom the tradition of Marlowe's aggressive impiety and general gracelessness seems to attract quite as much as the real power of his genius, and for whom that 'hunger and thirst after unrighteousness,' which his work exhibits is presumably one of his principal charms —in spite of such impediments to judicious recognition, his unique eminence is now fully perceived and acknowledged. Let us be grateful to that group of ardent explorers who brushed the

thick dust of two centuries from the pages of our first great dramatic poet; but having tendered them our gratitude for real and brilliant service performed, we may still consider ourselves at liberty to inquire whether that absence of all just sense of proportion which distinguishes a contemporary school of criticism—a school whose loudest, most voluble apostles are capable of naming Villon in the same breath with Dante—is not lineally traceable to the imperfect equipoise of zeal and discretion which could permit Lamb to speak of Ford, for instance, as belonging to 'the first order of poets.'

Such is the rank assigned by Lamb to the author of *The Broken Heart*. 'Ford was of the first order of poets. He sought for sublimity not by parcels in metaphors or visible images, but directly where she has her full residence in the heart of man; in the actions and sufferings of the greatest minds.' Lamb's panegyric has special reference to the last scene of *The Broken Heart*, of which he says: 'I do not know where to find in any play a catastrophe so grand, so solemn, and so surprising as this. This is indeed, according to Milton, to "describe high passions and high actions." . . . The expression of this transcendent scene almost bears me in imagination

to Calvary and the Cross.' To ordinary eyes the suggestion of Calvary and the Cross is not very visible; but let that pass: the general pitch of the notes of praise is what we are here concerned with. Mr Swinburne follows Lamb, remarking that, 'of all last scenes on any stage, the last scene of this play is the most overwhelming in its unity of outward effect and inward impression.' Let us turn to the scene in question, the subject of all this measureless eulogy.

During a dance in the royal palace of Sparta, tidings are successively brought to the Princess Calantha of the sudden deaths of her brother, her father, and her betrothed. At the delivery of each fatal message she betrays no emotion or concern whatever, but, to the amazement of all present, commands that the music and dancing proceed without pause. At the conclusion, however, of the night's festivities, she suddenly collapses and dies, after explaining (for she appears to have thought that an explanation was fairly demanded) that she had not been really unmoved after all, but that the triple news of death had 'struck home, and here.' She fails, however, to account for her assumed indifference in any satisfactory way, for we are merely expected to admire it as a display of transcendent Spartan

etiquette, an exhibition conveying very little spiritual edification. Of course it is effective, provided that we are willing to accept, as a legitimate means towards effect, the grossest and most outrageous violation of artistic verisimilitude. In respect of this ridiculously over-praised scene from a fairly well written but rather mechanical play, it is refreshing to read the following words of moderation and good sense from Hazlitt: 'The passions may silence the voice of humanity, but it is, I think, equally against probability and decorum to make both the passions and the voice of humanity give way to a mere form of outward behaviour. Such a suppression of the strongest and most uncontrollable feelings can only be justified from necessity, for some great purpose, which is not the case in Ford's plays; or it must be done for the effect and *éclat* of the thing, which is not fortitude but affectation.'

The work of Ford's, which his admirers now call his masterpiece, is not, however, the *Broken Heart*, but the play with the disagreeable title and the still more disagreeable subject. The crime of incest was the not infrequent theme of the great tragic poets of antiquity, but they at least are guiltless of the charge of throwing over

it a sentimental glamour such as pervades this production of Ford's. *'Tis Pity she's a Whore* is certainly a work of accomplished literary skill, but its very air of artistic finish enhances its moral repulsiveness; for Ford, unlike most of his Elizabethan brethren, was ever a deliberate, cool, calculating literary workman, and while he is weaving this story of abnormal passion and investing it with all the grace and charm at his command, it is manifest that he is nowise carried away by the imaginative contemplation of it himself, but is all the while curiously studying the monstrous growth of his own diseased fancy in a cold anatomical fashion that rouses our moral repugnance in direct proportion as it excites our æsthetic admiration. He is always the craftsman, possessing a faculty of self-criticism rare among his compeers of that age. He has no fine frenzies, but a soberly disposed modern reader will hardly quarrel with him on that score, for frenzies, fine and otherwise, are quite plentiful enough in the works of Ford's contemporaries to be readily spared in his own. Unlike much of theirs, his verse is clean-cut and compact, but without special force or nerve, and entirely wanting in felicity and magic. Neither passages nor lines live in the reader's recollection. Regarding his

human delineations, Mr Swinburne says that Ford 'was rather a sculptor of character than a painter,' and this looks like an admirable critical distinction until we perceive that it is only a cleverly illusory way of saying, what is the plain truth, that Ford's *dramatis personæ* are discriminated in a very broad, general, elementary fashion, without subtlety of portraiture, without moral *nuances*.

Reverting to Hazlitt, one is sorry to find that great critic's sobriety of judgment, as evinced by his coolly judicial estimate of Ford, deserting him somewhat in the presence of Webster, of whom he observes: 'His *White Devil* and *Duchess of Malfi* upon the whole perhaps come the nearest to Shakespeare of anything we have on record.' It may be worth while briefly to consider the propriety of the criticism which brackets the name of John Webster with the greatest name in literature.

Coming in the immediate wake of the great master, Webster had, of course—as was inevitable with a man of his epoch—studied under Shakespeare, so to speak, and though he cannot be said to have 'caught his great language,' yet something like an echo of the master's utterance may be heard at times in the pupil's speech. Even this

however, is apt to be delusive, being really in part ascribable to that general community of tone and likeness of vocabulary amongst the Elizabethan dramatists, whereby, in a measure, all the contemporaries of Shakespeare seem to deliver themselves with somewhat of his accent and air. Then, too, Webster abounds with direct verbal reminiscences of Shakespeare. Plagiarisms I suppose they may be called, but, in truth, they are but petty larcenies of a kind having no deep dye of turpitude. Dryden says of Ben Jonson, referring to his spoliations of the classics, 'there is scarce a poet or historian among the Roman authors of those times whom he has not translated in *Sejanus* and *Catiline*. But he has done his robberies so openly that we may see he fears not to be taxed by any law. He invades authors like a monarch, and what would be theft in other poets is only victory in him.' This imperial mode of appropriation is not, however, Webster's manner. In fact, his numerous little filchings from Shakespeare are of the sneaking sort; less like heroical spoils of conquest than furtive nibblings at the vast stores of an inexhaustible granary. But, in conjunction with broader evidences of style, they help to show the extent of Shakespeare's literary influence upon

Webster. It was a literary influence almost solely, a moral influence hardly at all. Shakespeare could teach something of dramatic art to his immediate successors, but his large and lucid vision of life was an incommunicable private prerogative. Their habitual attitude of mind in presence of the deeper issues of existence bears no essential resemblance to his. Shakespeare now and again, as in *Measure for Measure*, resigned himself to a temporary sojourn in some desert tract of thought or feeling. But cynicism, disgust, and despair, were brief and casual refuges of his spirit. These moods are the permanent and congenial dwelling-places of minds like Webster's. In the presence of Shakespeare we feel ourselves in communication with an inexhaustible reservoir of vitality. Life passes into us from every pore of his mind. We turn to Webster and it is like exchanging the breath of morn for the exhalations of the charnel. An unwholesome chill goes out from him. An odour of decay oppresses the tenebrous air. This poet's morbid imagination affects us like that touch of the dead man's hand in one of the hideous scenes of his own most famous play.

That play is *The Duchess of Malfi*. Its heroine, the Duchess, a young widow, has recently

married her steward Antonio. Her powerful brothers, Duke Ferdinand and the Cardinal, through the agency of their spy and bravo, Bosola, become aware of her *mésalliance*, and, enraged at the discovery, proceed to put in motion an elaborately infernal machinery of punishment. She is incarcerated in her palace. Duke Ferdinand visits her in a darkened chamber and extends to her at parting a dead man's hand in lieu of his own. Horrified, she calls for lights, which, being brought, disclose the effigies of her husband and children, appearing as if murdered, and devised so ingeniously,

> By Vincentio Lauriola,
> The curious master in that quality,

as to deceive her with the semblance of nature. From this point onwards the horrors are dispensed with profuse liberality. Duke Ferdinand, apparently solicitous above all things that his sister should not suffer *ennui* in her durance, entertains her with a company of madmen purposely released from Bedlam. One of them sings a rousing catch, beginning cheerfully thus :—

> O let us howl some heavy note,
> Some deadly dogged howl.

They dance,—the performance, according to the

stage-direction, being accompanied 'with music answerable thereunto.' The Bedlamites having retired, Bosola enters. Bosola is a kind of human gangrene infecting the whole body of the play. His putrid fancy is ingeniously loathsome, and leaves a trace of slime upon all objects which it traverses: though it may here be remarked parenthetically that Webster exhibits in general a singular fondness for illustrations drawn from disease and corruption. In the circuit of his imagery the most frequent halting-places are the mad-house, the lazar-house, the charnel-house. But, as was observed, Bosola enters to the Duchess, announcing that he has come to make her tomb. Afterwards executioners appear, 'with a coffin, cords, and a bell.' Finally the Duchess, her woman Cariola, and her children are strangled on the stage. The play, however, still drags its festering length through another act, in the course of which several more or less unpleasant persons are suitably 'removed,' until the reader, satiated with such gruesome fare, is left to digest, if he can, his ghoulish banquet.

And these gross melodramatic horrors, irredeemable by any touch of saving imagination—these are the poetic elements which Lamb, admiring in them what he calls 'their remote-

ness from the conceptions of ordinary vengeance,' seriously, and with all the curious brilliance of his style, discusses as if such things really belonged to the domain of pure and noble art. Remote from ordinary conceptions these may be, but remote by any essential superiority of elevation they assuredly are not. Horrors that are stale and commonplace are, of course, recognised at once for the cheap and vulgar stuff that they are; but horrors that are strange and bizarre do not of necessity belong to any intrinsically higher level of art; both are properly of the same class, inasmuch as they propose to themselves the excitation of the same order of emotions. And the truth is, with regard to Webster and his group, that these men had no sober vision of things. Theirs is a world that reels in a 'disastrous twilight' of lust and blood. We rise from Shakespeare enlarged and illumined. Webster is felt as a contracting and blurring influence. Like his own Duchess of Malfi, when she exclaims:

> The heavens o'er my head seem made of molten brass,

we are oppressed as by a sense of a world which is but a narrow and noisome prison-house, with the heavens for its ignoble cope. The pity and

terror here are not such as purify. Life seems a chance medley, a rendezvous of bewildered phantoms; virtue in this disordered world is merely wasted, honour bears not issue, nobleness dies unto itself. What one wishes to protest against is the false criticism which would elevate him and his group to the rank of the masters who feed man's spirit, just as we should protest against the putting forward of a similar claim in behalf of such a writer, for instance, as Edgar Poe. Poe was a literary artist of much power; the objects viewed through his poetic lens are seen with a sombreness of body and prismatic brilliancy of outline which are not the shadow and light of nature, yet have their peculiar fascination; but the authentic masters, are they not masters in virtue of their power of nobly elucidating the difficult world, not of exhibiting it in a fantastic lime-light? And after all, the highest beauty in art is, perhaps, a transcendent propriety. The touches which allure us by strangeness, or which 'surprise by a fine excess,' belong at best to the second order of greatness. The highest, rarest, and most marvellous of all are those which simply compel us to feel that they are supremely fit and right.

One has to admit that Webster's fatalism, de-

based though it be?—a fatalism expressing itself in such words as those of Bosola,

> We are merely the stars' tennis balls, struck and bandied
> Which way please them—

is in its way impressive; but how unlike the fatalism of Greek tragedy, from which a certain tonic and astringent philosophy of life may be extracted! Webster's is merely a fatalism having its root in a conception of existence as essentially anarchic. In reading him we lose for the time all sensation of an ordered governance of things. Life seems a treacherous phantasm or lawless dream, in which human shapes chase one another like fortuitous shadows across an insubstantial arena. The ethical infertility of such a presentation of the world is manifest enough, but how shortsighted and shallow the criticism which professes to see any kinship between Shakespeare and a type of mind so defective in sanity of vision, so poor in humour, so remote from healthful nature, so out of touch with genial reality! 'A gulf or estuary of the sea which is Shakespeare!' The image is picturesque but unveracious, conveying as it does a suggestion of open sunlight and bracing briny air which is utterly foreign to Webster's talent. His art is no breezy inlet of

any ocean, but rather a subterranean chamber where the breath and light of morning never penetrate. In the palace of life he seems to inhabit, by preference, some mouldy dungeon, peopled with spectral memories, and odorous of death.

And herein is shown the vast distance of such men from Shakespeare. The airy amplitudes, the azure spaces of his mind, are apparent to everyone. The others stifle you within murderous walls. And it is, perhaps, not altogether fanciful to surmise that this very characteristic of their art may have had something to do with the secret of its special fascination for Charles Lamb. External nature, it is notorious, had no hold upon him; that exquisite genius was anything but at home under the open sky. The world as seen by a picturesque torchlight rather than by candid sunlight attracted his gaze. And it was a torchlighted world, a world of alternate deep shadow and vivid glare, of Rembrandtesque chiaroscuro, that he found in the minor Elizabethan drama. As its great discoverer and interpreter and exhibitor he came to feel almost a sense of proprietorship in it, and to love everything it contained with the partiality one feels for one's own. Everything that smacked of

Elizabethanism was dear to him. Its mannerisms, its affectations, its extravagances, its horrors, were sacred in his eyes. Its worst literary methods were regarded by him fondly. He could speak, for instance, of the frequent joint-authorship of Elizabethan plays as 'the noble practice of those times.' Of course the mere personal relation of the collaborators may often have had in it much of the nobleness of beautiful friendship; but as to its artistic outcome, no practice could be more fatal to integrity of imaginative conception.

At the date of the appearance of Lamb's *Specimens of English Dramatic Poets who lived about the time of Shakespeare*, exaggerated eulogy of those poets may in some sort be said to have been a simple act of justice. It was but paying them, with perhaps a high rate of interest, the arrears of honour accumulated during a century and a half of detraction or oblivion. But matters being thus balanced, is it not time for criticism to settle itself to a normal level? It may seem curious, two hundred and fifty years after a group of writers has passed away, that any need should arise for seriously disputing inordinate claims advanced on their behalf; but so long as literary history is what it always has been—a record of

revolutions and counter-revolutions, of reactions and restorations—the necessity of periodical revisionary judgments will recur. The splendid Elizabethan age of literature met the appropriate fate of a spendthrift. Prodigal of its wealth and vigour, and wasting its substance in emotional and intellectual riotous living, it had reached a fantastic senility in the school of the Concettists ere it finally sank into that unhonoured grave, which a flippant generation made haste to desecrate and to dance upon. After an interval of transition, there arose the strong, brilliant, self-assertive age of clear sense and apt expression, the age which banished romance and mystery, and which, after a protracted reign, was itself deposed by the returning exiles. The close of the eighteenth century witnessed a poetic revival, and then a small band of enthusiasts cleared away the overgrowth of brambles from that neglected grave of the magnificent spendthrift, and built in their stead a monument of splendid praise. But the monument has been carried towering up and up till one cannot refuse to believe that it has at last reached the perilous height which threatens it with the fate of other Babels.

Enough, however, has been said. Let us take leave of Shakespeare's dramatic contemporaries

and immediate successors with a hearty recognition of one great though extrinsic merit common to them all. They are not gulfs or estuaries of his ocean, but they stand towards him in one very serviceable relation, they are his finest imaginable foils. If we live under the shadow of the Andes, a time comes when their immensity ceases to be a perpetual astonishment to us. But if Skiddaw and Helvellyn could suddenly be placed in the foreground, we should experience a renewed sensation of the vastness of Chimborazo and Aconcagua. If any reader is so unfortunate as to find that a prolonged familiarity with Shakespeare begets at last a somewhat blunted sensibility to the master's supreme power, a remedy is at hand by which his palate may recover its gust. Let him try a course of Webster and Dekker, Randolph and Tourneur, Middleton and Heywood and Ford.

## THE PUNISHMENT OF GENIUS

'WHAT Adonais is, why fear we to become?' So asks the singer who stands before the world as Adonais's great chief mourner—Shelley. On the whole—though in a sense other than his elegist intended—most of us might well shrink from becoming what, thanks to the insatiable modern rage of curiosity about everything that concerns the private life of public men, and thanks to the *littérateurs* who pander to this unhallowed lust, Adonais is. He was one of the greatest of English poets; he led a life in which there was no doubt a vast deal of keen and exquisite pleasure, but little or no happiness; thrown, for the most part, among a set of clever, small men, he towers above them, a man by no means clever but very great; though not unfortunate in the worst and bitterest sense of the word, though he had no struggles with im-

mediate adversity and want, he yet suffered much; he lavished the strength of a tender and noble heart upon a rather commonplace young woman, who evidently had no suspicion that she was worshipped—she, ordinary little piece of pretty Eve's flesh—by one of earth's immortal sons. Among these clever, small men, Hunt, Reynolds, and the rest, by whom he was surrounded, and with whom in popular estimation he was scarce distinguishably merged, he held before his eyes a lofty and splendid ideal of excellence in the art which he had chosen, or which nature had chosen for him. He saw this ideal at first with blurred and faltering vision, but ever more clearly as his eyes were purged with the euphrasy and rue of human experience; he added to the store of the world's beauty, he increased the sum of man's happiness, and doing this he was rewarded with contempt and ribald mockery, was condemned to read things written about himself which if uttered in oral intercourse would be recognised by everybody as gross insult and brutal outrage; spending himself in the service of man, his recompense was not seldom such scorn and contumely as might appropriately be reserved for an enemy of one's species. Worn out by suffering and discouragement, and per-

haps in part by the yet more shattering pangs of immoderate joy, he sinks in premature death; at last,

> Envy and calumny and hate and pain,
> And that unrest which men miscall delight,
> Can touch him not and torture not again.

No, these things cannot now touch him—but that immitigable nuisance and pest, the zeal and industry and accuracy of the painstaking modern editor, can; the hungering, gloating, ravening delight in everything that can belittle our great ones—this can touch him still, though perhaps he does not feel the ignominious contact, for—

> He wakes or sleeps with the enduring dead,

and we that honour and love him may be pardoned for hoping that he sleeps—for hoping that he sleeps the blessed sleep of them who heed not, because they do not hear.

On the other hand, let us suppose he does not sleep, but wakes—wakes, and harkens to what sounds soever of earthly detraction or praise may reach him, throned among his fellow 'inheritors of unfulfilled renown,' whose place is 'far in the unapparent.' For he died full of thwarted aims and balked ambitions, his life a splendid fragment like his own *Hyperion*; and

perhaps it is not wildly fanciful to think of the eager spirit of Adonais as taking some posthumous interest in the progress and consummation of his own terrestrial fame. He will have seen that fame gradually disentangled from minor accidents and incidents which at first did much to perplex it and hinder it from having free way; disentangled from 'Cockney Schools,' real or imaginary; from irrelevant prejudices arising out of political and personal considerations; from warring theories of literary art. He will have seen his influence operating as a potent factor in the artistic evolution of the most eminent of present day poets. He will have seen the main and essential facts of his life laid before the world by a distinguished and genial *dilettante*, whose biography of him was not indeed a work of high talent, but was inspired by sympathy and directed by good taste. In a word, he will have seen almost everything come to pass which, living, he could have hoped for.

Unfortunately, however, this is not all; would it were! He will have seen Haydon's *Journal* go forth to posterity, perpetuating a slander which went unrebuked and undenied till yesterday. He will have seen the passionate letters to

his somewhat mundane goddess catalogued in sale lists, and knocked down under the auctioneer's hammer. He will have seen the effigy of his warm and palpitating heart held up to the stare of a world that with gaping mouth and craning neck presses forward into every sanctuary where there is a secret to be ravished and a veil to be rent in twain. He will have seen the yelping pack of scandal, never so joyous as when they can scent some fallen greatness, or run down any noble quarry. He will have seen the yet uncleaner creature, the thing of teeth and claws, that lives by scratching up the soil from over the bones of the buried and laying corruption bare. He will have seen the injudicious and uncritical worshipper. He will have seen the painstaking modern editor.

The painstaking modern editor! The taking of pains is an excellent thing if they be taken for any useful or commendable purpose; but who will seriously pretend that such a purpose is served by Mr Buxton Forman's latest addition to Keats literature? Mr Forman has seen fit to publish, by way of a supplement to his edition of Keats's works, a volume of 'fresh verses and new readings, essays and letters lately found, and passages formerly (he might have added

judiciously) suppressed.' Accuracy is a fine quality, kept within decent bounds; but there is such a thing as accuracy run mad. The rampant accuracy of this book is nothing short of a nuisance. Keats wrote in a letter, 'I much wait,' instead of 'I must wait,' and Mr Forman carefully preserves the blunder. Keats, in the manuscript of some verses, wrote *one* by mistake for *on*, and Mr Forman religiously records the matter. Keats in another manuscript wrote *spright*, and afterwards changed it to *sprite*, and the solemn fact is duly chronicled by this devout editor. Then, through page upon page without end, we learn how *ye lovelorn artists* was altered to *ye artists lovelorn; like the mole* to *like a mole; a king alive* to *a breathing king; say, wherefore did I laugh?* to *I say, why did I laugh?; a minute's thought* to *a moment's thought; for in sooth I'm* to *soothly I am; a* to *the; where* to *when; could* to *would;* and so on. It is all very painstaking, and very ridiculous. To be sure, Mr Forman has a little—precious little—really interesting information to communicate as the result of his laborious collation of Keats's MSS. and printed texts. Thus, it is worth while to be admitted to a sight of the process by which, in *Hyperion*, a bad phrase like

*a poison-feel of brass* was altered to *savour of poisonous brass*, the latter being clearly an improvement from the point of view of mere diction, though there is some obscurity in the suggestion of a smell of brass, and both obscurity and crudity in making the doomed Titan interpret as premonitions of his fall these whiffs apparently from an adjacent foundry or engineering works. Again, in the same magnificent poem, it is interesting to watch a poor, weak, unworkmanlike line such as

> When an earthquake hath shook their city towers

grow into the strong and entirely satisfactory

> When earthquakes jar their battlements and towers.

It is interesting also to find Keats—the sometime surgeon's apprentice and student at Guy's—developing in another direction the skill of a trained operator, successfully amputating redundant phraseology or excrescent imagery, and neatly tying up the severed arteries of verse as he proceeds. Mr Forman gives us two or three noteworthy instances of Keats's deftness at this work; but, valuable for critical purposes as these may possibly be, there still remains the question, Would Keats himself have wished these little

details to be made public? This question, though natural enough, is one the like of which we so seldom think of asking nowadays that it will probably appear quite childish and verdant in its simplicity to the experienced intelligence of Mr Buxton Forman. Yet surely it touches a matter which lies at the root of our whole moral relation to the great writers whom we profess to honour. That relation is entirely one of indebtedness on our part for benefactions by them conferred. Our obligation is one which we have no means of ever discharging; for the most part, during the lives of these our benefactors, we showed little anxiety to discharge it; nay, in many cases—and that of Keats is one—we could hardly bring ourselves to say 'thank you' for their gifts, even if we did not fling them back with derision in the faces of the generous givers. Let us get this fact—an obvious one, but obvious facts are apt to be ignored from their very obviousness—well impressed into our minds. Here is a class of men to whom we owe what it is hopeless to dream of repaying; we can never repay it: they will remain our creditors to the end of time. But let us at all events treat them with the decent civility which becomes an insolvent debtor; let us not display a spirit of base

and black ingratitude for inestimable favours; let us ask ourselves, when we are about to say or do aught that affects the name and fame of these munificent persons, 'Would they, themselves, if they were here and could be consulted, approve the doing or saying of this thing?' It is manifestly the very least which honour—nay, common decency in the recognition of obligations—demands of us. I know there are persons who argue the case from the opposite point of view; who say, 'We see no reason why genius should be protected against itself in the way you advocate; if, for example, an eminent poet's journals or private letters come to light by accident, and disclose a mean or paltry side of his nature—or, it may be, a vicious side—well, that side existed; it was a fact, no less than his genius was; and it is of importance to moral science that the fact should be known.' To test the morality of this doctrine, let us transfer it into the region of practical affairs and ordinary human relations. Let us suppose that a friend, to whose good offices we owe some portion of whatever happy fortune may have attended our lives, should in an unguarded moment confide to us the revelation of follies, weaknesses, or sins which we had not suspected; shall ours be the voice to pro-

claim these things to the world? The two cases are, in all their essential bearings, analogous—unless, indeed, we go so far as to repudiate indebtedness to the exalted human souls who, though their greatness may have had some alloy of vulgar weakness or error, have enriched our experience with noble pleasures such as rank among the few enduring goods of life.

These reflections, it is almost needless to say, are suggested by more grave transgressions of Mr Forman's than the merely injudicious editing of Keats's literary remains. That, of itself, is indeed bad enough; but perhaps *foolish* is the harshest word we need apply to it. Keats, like any other poet, often wrote down lines and phrases which he afterwards cancelled as unsatisfactory; and of course we may be sure that he himself would wish all such rejected readings to perish, and would never dream that the scholarship of the next age would occupy itself with the exhumation of everything which the author himself had deliberately and wisely buried, though unhappily in a too shallow grave. There can be no sort of doubt as to the poet's own wishes in the matter; and if his editor is not loyal enough to the poet's memory to care two straws about respecting such wishes, the

matter is one which affects the credit of the editor more than that of the poet. Into the abysmal mysteries of the editorial conscience ordinary readers will not peer too curiously; and, in truth, the results of Mr Forman's researches among Keats's MSS. are, for the most part, so very uninteresting that few people are likely to feel either attracted or repelled by the outcome of such minutely and uselessly laborious idleness. In unearthing some prose articles which Keats contributed to the *Examiner* and *Champion* newspapers, Mr Forman has rendered a more legitimate service. The articles are intrinsically worthless, but are interesting for the reflections which they inevitably suggest. If Keats had been forced to live by his pen, it is scarcely conceivable that he could have earned his salt by such wretched writing as these two or three 'critical notices' of books and plays—writing so vilely bad that it would disgrace a third-rate provincial newspaper. Keats himself, however, both wrote and published it, and there can thus be no actual impropriety in its resuscitation.

Quite different is the case of the 'fresh letters and passages formerly suppressed,' which fill about a hundred pages of Mr Forman's new

volume. There is no denying that they distinctly lower one's estimate of Keats as a man—that they are emphatically a disservice and an injury to his fame. They bring out in strong light a poor and vulgar side of his nature, which had better have remained in shadow. Its revelation is Keats's loss, and nobody's gain; nay, it is our loss too—the loss of an illusion which was a thousand times better than the uncomely truth. Again we ask the question, Is it conceivable that Keats, had he been gifted with prevision, could have anticipated with complacency the posthumous publication of these letters? And if not, what excuse has any man for doing this irreparable and wanton wrong to the unoffending dead? The widow of Shelley, knowing that her husband had in his lifetime intended a certain bequest to one of his needy friends, in pure loyalty to his memory translated that intention into voluntary act. In like manner Keats intended certain bequests, but dying, left no will expressly devising the same; he intended, we may be sure, that his private letters, or great part of them, should descend as a legacy—to oblivion. It was the clear duty of those upon whom the responsibility devolved, to act as faithful executors of an indisputable though

unwritten testament. They, however, have taken a different view of their functions, a view which, unhappily, is participated in, and acted upon, by a daily increasing number of such persons as have in their hands the discretionary administration of spiritual trusts. In the end what it comes to is this, that we are imposing penalties upon those who have committed the glorious offence of devoting their lives to our enrichment, and wearing out their hearts in our thankless service. They have been guilty of the crime of genius, and are punished accordingly. Whenever we can, we see to it that retribution overtakes them during their lifetime; but that is not always possible ; great malefactors of their class have been known to evade the penal law against genius and go down unsentenced to their graves. Sooner or later, however, their crime comes home to roost. The grass may have grown thick above the place of their sleep, but even a ghost can be haled to judgment, and another generation can still drag the waters of Lethe if peradventure the mud and ooze may yield up the disfeatured corpse of some old scandal or forgotten shame. Such is the lot of the modern man of genius; living, he may

escape the poisoned arrow; but dead, he is still a banquet for the ghoul.

'He gave the people of his best:
His worst he kept, his best he gave;
My Shakespeare's curse on clown and knave
Who will not let his ashes rest.'

## KEATS AND MR COLVIN

THE poet in Keats (and he was nearly all poet) had reached full maturity before he died—indeed, Mr Colvin, in the excellent biography contributed by him to Mr Morley's series, gives good reasons for thinking that Keats lived to be more than mature, to be actually decadent: witness *The Cap and Bells* and the strangely ill-judged and uninspired recast of *Hyperion*, long mistaken for a rough first draught—but the residue of Keats's personality, the ten or fifteen per cent. of him that was not poet, but friend, lover, philosophical observer, social critic, was hardly more than adolescent to the very last. The 'marvellous boy' Chatterton was really never a boy at all. Keats was never anything else. Whether, if he had lived, his character, manners, and speech would have ultimately acquired the restraint and reserve, the felicitous

and noble reticence, which had just begun to appear in his poetry, is, of course, a hopeless speculation; what is certain is that he died with these qualities undeveloped, and not even rudimentarily disclosed, in his nature. The absence of such qualities makes his letters a singularly interesting and valuable self-revelation; but, to the present writer at least (who is forced to acknowledge himself an eccentric person in regard to these matters), it does not make them pleasant reading. Keats is altogether too frank; he is even, if I may say so without provoking an imputation of cynicism, too sincere. In going over his letters we never have the pleasant exercise of divining something that has been left unsaid; there is no space for reading between the lines. He blurts out everything, like the impulsive, transparent, high-spirited, affectionate boy that he was. He is as garrulous, as confidential, as indiscreet as Marie Bashkirtseff, and a thousand times more veracious and genuine; for he would not give himself the trouble to pose, and it is doubtful if he possessed a looking-glass. From a reader's point of view, the drawback to this habit of complete self-disclosure is that it results in anything rather than variety of impression. It makes his letters, in spite of all

accidental and superficial diversity of circumstance and subject-matter, the most monotonous reading imaginable, because, while other men present different facets of their personality to different correspondents, or even assume ventriloquial disguises in speaking down the epistolary telephone, he offers his whole spiritual surface to every eye, and is the same unvaried voice to every ear. Other men write letters with a monitor looking over their shoulders, and a prompter at their elbows. John Keats wrote without any other suggestion, correction, or admonition than were furnished by John Keats.

To class him with the great letter-writers—as Mr Colvin implicitly does by speaking of 'the other great letter-writers in English'—seems to me a questionable proceeding. With the exceptions of Pope and Burns, I can think of no other first-rate English poet whose greatness seems to me to be more entirely in abeyance than Keats's in letter-writing. When he glances at any great subject other than his own art, he does so in a way that seems to show imperfect comprehension of them; while the flat trivialities that occupy so much space in his correspondence are not, for the most part, redeemed by any specially ennobling grace or charm of touch. He is frequently jocose

without being in the least witty or amusing: his facetiousness consists mainly in the execution of all manner of undignified gambols, which he mistakes for humorous sallies (such for instance, as commencing several consecutive paragraphs with the formula, *Twang dillo dee*). Personally he seems to have been a manly young man on the whole, but as a letter-writer his loquacity too often degenerates into an incontinent gushiness which is neither manly nor properly boy-like, but simply hobbledehoyish. And Cockney vulgarity, unfortunately, is never far distant. Faults of breeding—by which I do not mean mere departures from conventional carriage, mere sins against the decalogue of Turveydrop, but violations of the instinctive code of right manners—are but too common in these pages. The divinity of genius does indeed sometimes shine through it all; but — if my fellow-worshippers will pardon the profanity — it is Apollo with an unmistakable dash of 'Arry.

Mr Colvin has discharged his task in what was, I suppose, the only way legitimately open to him. Had it been a question of publishing Keats's correspondence for the first time, he hints that he might have preferred a method of selection and partial suppression; but, the case stand-

ing as it does, he recognises that such a course, however personally acceptable to himself, would have been unsatisfactory to most readers. He therefore rejects altogether the corruptions which Lord Houghton, with unmistakably good intentions, foisted upon the text; and his aim has been to give us Keats, not quite the whole Keats, yet nothing but Keats—'omitting' to quote his own words, 'a few passages of mere crudity, hardly more than two pages in all, but not attempting to suppress those which betray the weak places in the writer's nature, his flaws of taste and training, his movements of waywardness, irritability, and morbid suspicion.' Concerning the ethics of editorial procedure in such cases, the writer of this article having some time ago uttered himself at large elsewhere, with sufficient avoidance of ambiguity, has no intention of reiterating his sentiments here. But I think I cannot be flattering myself unduly by believing that one passage in Mr Colvin's admirable preface was written with a distinct reference to certain published words of my own; and in the course of this passage Mr Colvin says: 'Even as an artist, in the work which he himself published to the world, Keats was not one of those of whom it could be said, "his worst he kept, his best he

gave." Rather he gave promiscuously, in the just confidence that among the failures and half-successes of his inexperienced youth would be found enough of the best to establish his place among the poets after his death.' Quite true, if by 'worst' and 'best' we simply mean degrees of literary merit; but to do so is clearly to misapply Tennyson's words. Keats 'gave' indifferently his best and worst verses, because, like most of his poetic contemporaries, he was probably not always able to discriminate the two; but he was fully able to distinguish between the great and the petty in his own personal character; and we may be sure that in his heart of hearts he wished to 'give' the world no part of himself that was not noble and high and true. He would surely have been the last to desire that his occasional outbursts of petulance, of unworthy distrust, of irritated self-esteem, should be fixed in the permanence which befits his greatness alone. 'The object,' says Mr Colvin, 'of publishing a man's correspondence is not merely to give literary pleasure — it is to make the man himself known'; but to say thus is to assume (quite unwarrantably, as it appears to me) that we alone, the poet's public, have rights in the matter, while the poet himself has none:

that our right of inquisition is unassailable, and the poet's right of privacy non-existent. Touching one important matter, I venture here to make a confession of ignorance which, in the opinion of some readers, may perhaps put me out of court altogether, and disqualify me for uttering another word concerning Keats's life or writings. I have never read the letters to Fanny Brawne, and no consideration shall ever induce me to look at them. From common report I have learned their general character and spirit; but to read them—why, I should feel like a man listening at a keyhole, or spying over a wall. Mr Colvin, to his honour be it said, gives them no place in his edition of Keats's correspondence. This is a matter about which there can be no conflict of opinions among healthy-minded persons; but in my inability to share Mr Colvin's general estimate of Keats's genius for letter-writing, many readers will doubtless differ from me on vital points. It seems to me that he had not paid much attention to the art of handling prose as a precise instrument of expression, and it is also probable that he deliberately or instinctively saved his best powers, and nursed his finest impulses, for poetry alone. Not to measure him against the other great letter-

writers' whom Mr Colvin names, take some of the new letters of Charlotte Brontë, published the other day. What a great tone is in them! What a profound and powerful spirit is seen to tremble behind the words, showing us its wounds, its agitations, its immense loneliness, without artificial reserve, without unseemly self-betrayal, nor yet without regard for the decencies of comely and even studied expression. Compared with a voice calling from such deeps as those, the letters of Keats seem, for the most part, the veriest infantine prattle and babble.

Looking over some of the dates given in Mr Colvin's Preface, one cannot but reflect how many of Keats's circle survived until almost the present day. Keats's brother George, and Armitage Brown, only outlived the poet some twenty years; but Reynolds and Bailey lived till 1852, Hunt till 1859, Dilke till 1864, Cowden Clarke till 1877, Severn till 1879, and Fanny Keats (Señora Llanos) till 1889. It is difficult not to think that, if Lord Houghton had taken the requisite trouble, he might have learned more about the poet than he did, and have been able to paint a more life-like portrait. For the task was surely not a very hard one. Keats's was a simple and legible nature. He did not, like

Shelley, send out tortuous roots and 'intertwisted fibres serpentine' in every direction. He stood in no perplexingly elaborate relation to his age. He was, thank heaven! not one of the writers about whom a 'Life and Times' is necessary. His appropriate fate would have been to live and die

> 'Content on pleasant sward,
> Leaving great verse unto a little clan.'

As it was, he left that imperishable legacy to a clan which at first was indeed little, but which now embraces all who, vocal or silent, 'follow the delightful Muse.'

## THE LANCASHIRE LAUREATE

THERE died the other day a poet whose verse was neither great nor was precisely left unto a little clan, but who, nevertheless, wrote poetry that was of sterling worth, and left it as a legacy, not so much to his country as to his county—to that portion of England which at its northern limits rubs shoulders with Wordsworth's mountains; on the north-east climbs towards those rolling lengths of moorland which cradled the passionate genius of Charlotte and Emily Brontë; on the south-east sinks away in fertile plains amidst which De Quincey learned his first lessons in scholarship and in life; and at its south-western extremity touches hands with the world from the shores of the Mersey. It would hardly be true to say that Edwin Waugh gave up to Lancashire what was meant for mankind, for by everything he was and did, as

well as by much that he was not and could not do, he was meant for Lancashire emphatically. He belonged to his county by virtue of that racy peasant patois in which his best and most characteristic pieces were written ; he belonged to it by virtue of that homely, hearty, forthright plainness and directness which, when somewhat unduly developed, make the Lancashire man seem a little aggressive ; he belonged to it by his abundant force and *grit*, to use a word which is perhaps oftener heard in Lancashire than elsewhere, standing as it does for a quality in which the Lancashire mind and character are undoubtedly rich ; and he belonged to it—if Lancashire men will allow one to say so—by a certain lack of the more delicate artistic instincts, a deficiency which prevents his vigorous verse from attaining that classical quality which stamps the work of such a poet as William Barnes. On the maternal side he came of a Border stock, and in those parts of his nature and genius which do not seem to be quite so peculiarly of Lancashire lineage, he may be considered as striking root, not southward towards his brother singer of Dorset, but northward towards his special master, the immortal prototype of his literary class, Burns. ' Indeed,

while he stands always with firm foothold upon his native shire, and paints with manifest preference, and with never-failing zest and affection, the humours and experiences of his fellow county-folk, he betrays certain ancestral affinities with a more northern racial type, and hankerings after a wilder and larger nature-beauty than English lowlands afford. In presence of more purely charming landscape he has stirrings of the blood towards ruder regions,

> Where wild hawks with glee on the hurricane sail,
> And the mountain crags thrill to the rush of the gale;

and his pictures of rustic maidenhood seem to recall such visions as Wordsworth's Highland Girl, for the peasant lass who embodies his ideal of virgin witchery is

> . . . graceful as the mountain doe
> That snuffs the forest air,
> And she brings the smell of the heather-bell
> In the tresses of her hair.

It is Waugh's merit, as it is perhaps also his misfortune, that he continually reminds us of Burns; his merit, because there is no one we would rather be reminded of; his misfortune, because the unapproachable height of Burns's place above all other writers of dialect poetry is

only emphasised by any suggestion of a comparison. Except in Shelley, there is, perhaps, nothing in literature comparable to the pure, absolute, elemental lyrism of Burns's finest songs. To some of them it gives that appearance—so marked in the folk-music of middle and upper Europe—of being rather the impersonal product of a people than the deliberate composition of an individual; whilst in others it is associated with an egoism so salient and masterful, that the reader is simply overborne by the dominance of an irresistible personality. But all Burns's qualities are on the great scale. Look at his humour. This laughter is no crackling of thorns under a pot, but a sheer blazing and roaring of piled-up faggots of fun. It is the very riot and revelry of mirth; there is something demoniacal about this hilarity. Even the coarseness that goes with it hardly offends us, it is so manifestly and naturally of a piece with the utter licence and abandonment which this lord of literary misrule has for the nonce decreed. Or take another instance. In all times, from Isaiah to Mr Bright, anger has been a fruitful source of impressive style in literature and oratory; and Burns could be magnificently angry. Nor was his a mere rhetorical spleen or passion of words, such as one

modern poet, at least, provides sufficient examples of; it was real, unmistakable wrath, as of the Berserkers of old. When a man of genius of this type, with his immense fund of emotion, is glad, or angry, or delighted, he is altogether more glad or angry or delighted than other people would be from the like cause; and when he expresses himself in language simply commensurate with his feelings we call him extravagant, the truth being that we are obtuse: he has felt what we ought to feel, but are too dull. When a wounded hare limps past him he does not go home and pen a mild and soft-toned remonstrance, addressed to the sportsman who has inflicted this suffering upon the harmless creature of the fields: he flames out—

> Inhuman man, curse on thy barbarous art,
> And blasted be thy murder-aiming eye!

This is not the language of polished society, but it *is* the language of a great-hearted man of genius, whose infinite capacities of love and tenderness are simply the counterparts of an equally infinite capacity of fierce hate and scorn. On such a nature we must not presume to impose our little bye-laws; and we must be prepared to see such a volcanic temperament, so

charged with the primary stuff of human passions, flaming forth erratically in various directions, scorching many things, and perhaps burning its own substance to premature cinders. Upon a calm, 'even-balanced soul' like Wordsworth's, the yoke of discipline and duty will lie with natural grace and fitness; but it is hardly too much to say, that for a poet like Burns to have led a strictly decent and well-regulated life would have almost seemed an unpardonable piece of inconsistency.

This splendid exuberance of every kind of force is not a feature we must look for in such a writer as the subject of this article. He could inveigh, energetically enough—as he does in some very bitter verses entitled 'The World'—against injustice and hypocrisy, and hollow conventionality, but he seems to be hitting out at abstractions, and we watch the performance with rather languid interest. His humour, however, is delightfully real and alive; his pathos is at least as tender as Burns's own, and in one respect the comparison with the master is to the pupil's advantage. Everyone has noticed that when Burns exchanges the Ayrshire Doric for ordinary English the descent is swift and sheer. From being a bard and minstrel he becomes a literary

man, and an imperfectly trained and equipped one, too. Take 'The Cottar's Saturday Night,' for example. Despite the doubtful fitness of the stately stanza for the homely theme, a high level of beauty is maintained throughout until we come to the closing passage, when he suddenly drops from idyllic Scotch into rhetorical English —not remarkably sound English either, for he even commits our modern enormity of sandwiching the adverb between the verb and the sign of the infinitive. We catch something of the false tone of eighteenth-century declamation at once. The very patriotism seems half academic. We could have responded to any amount of enthusiasm for Scotland, but *Scotia* gives us no thrill. This inability to handle book-English as effectively as provincial speech cannot however be alleged against Waugh, and in his case there is no room for supposing that a merely factitious distinction has been lent by dialect to verse which would otherwise have been devoid of interest. Let any competent person read some of his non-dialect poems such as 'The Moorland Witch,' or 'Love and Gold,' and he will be forced to confess that they have the true ballad-charm, while the purity of their diction is above impeachment. In 'Willy's Grave,' again, he shows

himself a real master of pathetic effect, and nothing could exceed the tenderness of touch with which he pictures the widowed mother returning to her lonely cottage from visiting her child's grave in the churchyard, and tells us how—

> She paused before she dropped the sneck
> That closed her lambless fold—
> It grieved her heart to bar the door
> And leave him in the cold.

It is noticeable, however—and by no means regrettable—that we are never far from provincialism even in these pieces professedly written in 'good' English. The word *sneck* in the foregoing stanza (the inside part of the iron fastening of a latched door) is an instance. When he speaks of the redbreast that—

> Cowers his wing in the frozen haw tree,

the transitive use of the verb *cower* is evidently provincial. Then he has—

> When the lush bluebell's little censer swings,
> And pleasant incense to the wandering breezes flings.

The word *lush*, which I have seen used by writers of repute in a way indicating that they took it to be a form of *luscious*, is here used accurately to mean limp, pliant, *loose* (as to the

stem). With exquisitely refined observation of nature he tells us how—

> The throstle's sweet vesper, at summer day's close,
> Shook the coronal dews on the rim of the rose;

and at first sight the word *rim*, which we commonly reserve as proper to the edge of circular objects only, may seem ill-chosen or applied with too much elasticity; but writers anterior to Chaucer called even the outer belt of a woodland its *ryme*, and Waugh, who is said to have been a good philologist, no doubt knew something of the pedigree of most of his expressions.

It cannot, however, be denied that the best and most characteristic of Waugh's verses are those written wholly in the Lancashire tongue. Except by philological students, the relation between the English in which educated persons write and the various forms of provincial speech was, until quite recent years, curiously misapprehended; and even to this day there are people imagining themselves educated who take it for granted that books and 'polite' conversation provide the one absolute standard of right English, and that all rural modes of language are more or less irregular and illegitimate deflections from a canonical type. But leaving out a few such benighted persons, it

is now generally understood that a really purer English—purer in the sense of being more homogeneous and consistent with itself—is often spoken by unschooled rustics than by the lettered classes. The rustic is a natural and unconscious conservative in his speech, which—except where it has caught some infection from the newspaper or the hustings, those two great disturbers of the original wells that our fathers have digged—is the self-same speech which the patriarchs of his hamlet spoke centuries ago. Lancashire in the last century had a humorist who wrote the language of his locality—Collier, better known as 'Tim Bobbin,' author of 'Tummas and Meary'—and a comparison between his vocabulary and that in use around Rochdale at the present day reveals no essential change; but if we compare the diction of Collier's more famous metropolitan contemporaries with that of living masters of style, we find that a change very considerable indeed has been in process during the same interval. Largely this change has been of the nature of a normal and necessary expansion; the language of active-minded persons who think much and read much, being in a more 'fluid and attaching' state than the crystallised idiom of country-folk who hardly

read or think at all, is continually attracting to itself the flotsam of passing fashions in art and thought and society, assimilating new material, and recruiting itself from a thousand sources. Thus the language of modern literature, and even the lingo of third-rate journalism, with all its barbarous corruptions and neologies, is inevitably an instrument of more various range than any provincial dialect can be; many things can be said in it which the speech of the ploughman has no words for; but, on the other hand, the speech of the ploughman contains everything that is requisite for the utterance of those cardinal emotions and elementary states of feeling which are the primary stuff of lyric poetry; and while the language of the author and the journalist is the self-conscious expression of civilisation, the language of the sower and the reaper is the immediate voice of life.

Thus the fitness for the poet's purposes of what some people still ignorantly look down upon as the jargon of 'country bumpkins,' will be readily allowed—its fitness, at all events, for *some* of the poet's purposes, and those by no means the ignoblest. Within its narrower limits we cannot have stateliness and splendour, qualities alien to rusticity; but we do not look for the costume

of courts under the thatch of the cottage. It is enough that the broadest comedy and the deepest tragedy of life may find utterance in the lowliest folk-tongue, and that a poet may use the language of the hedger and ditcher to unseal the eternal sources of laughter and tears. A man of the people, writing of and for the people, our Lancashire bard's wit and pathos were of the homeliest kind, and his stories were the short and simple annals of the poor; but in these days, when criticism is wisely learning to look less for academic qualities of art and style and more for the original touch of nature which makes the whole world kin, the writer whose appeal in the first instance is not to criticism at all, but to the human heart, is precisely he who is likeliest in the long run to win the suffrages of both.

Mr Waugh sprang into sudden celebrity in his county some thirty-five years ago on the publication of his song, 'Come whoam to thi' childer an' me'; but although it showed to the full his admirable 'realism' of detail (to use a word which is becoming 'soiled with all ignoble use'), he has written pieces in which his other good qualities are more conspicuous. In all of them, however, this 'realism' is so close to the fact, and of so homely a fashion, that it might

well disguise from superficial view the art which accompanies it; and 'the art itself is nature' in a very literal sense. Take as an illustration the verses entitled 'Owd Enoch.'

Owd Enoch o' Dan's* laid his pipe deawn o' th' hob
And his thin fingers played i' th' white thatch of his nob.
'I'm gettin' done up,' to their Betty he said;
'Dost think thae could doff me, an' dad me to bed?'

Then hoo geet him to bed, an' hoo happed him up weel,
An' hoo said to him, 'Enoch, lad, heaw doesto feel?'
'These limbs o' mine, Betty, they're cranky an' sore;
It's time to shut up when one's getten four score.'

Then he turn't his-sel o'er, like a chylt tir't wi' play,
An' Betty crept round while he're dozin' away;
As his e'e-lids sank deawn, th' owd lad mutter't 'Well doon!
I think there's a bit o' sound sleep comin' on.'

Then hoo thought hoo'd sit by till he'd had his nap o'er,—
If hoo'd sit theer till then hoo'd ha' risen no more;
For he cool t eawt o' th' world, an' his e'en lost their leet,
Like a cinder i' th' firegrate i' th' deeod time o' th' neet.

No fine phrases could match that movingly simple description of the quiet 'cooling out' of the fire of life. Further on the pathos gives

* This descriptive formula (Enoch o' Dan's=Enoch, son of Dan), so far as I know, is now fast dying out in Waugh's county; but within the memory of older persons it was very common in some districts, and was not always so brief and uncircumstantial as here. I cannot, however, vouch for the accuracy of the story that a stranger, upon inquiring for

place to a touch of humour, and the quaint diction lends a certain freshness to a rather venerable jest.

So Betty wur left to toar on bi her-sel ;
An' heaw hoo poo'd through it, no mortal can tell ;
But th' Doctor dropt in to look at her one day,
When hoo re rockin' bi' th' side of an odd cup o' tay.

'Well, Betty,' said th' Doctor, 'heaw dun yo' get on ?
I'm sorry to yer 'at yo'n lost yo'r owd mon.
What complaint had he, Betty ?' Says hoo, 'I caun't tell :
We ne'er had no doctor ; he deed of his-sel'.'

In 'Owd Pinder' we have the figure—always provocative of satire in the rustic mind—of the elderly husband with the youngish wife.

Owd Pinder wur a rackless foo,
An' spent his days i' spreein' ;
At th' end of every drinkin'-do
He's sure to crack o deein' ;
'Go, sell my rags an' sell my shoon,
Aw's never live to trail em ;
My ballis-pipes* are eawt o' tune,
An' th' wynt begins to fail 'em !

His saddest thought is that his young wife Matty will soon wed another when he is gone, and forget her departed Pinder ; so he lays upon

someone whose Christian name was Thomas, was told that he very likely meant Tummas o' Dick s o Bill's o' Harry's o' Peter's-wi-th'-beawlegs.

* Bellows-pipes=lungs.

her some dying injunctions with deep solemnity, and implores her to promise that she will never marry again. The pathos of this appeal is thrown away on the practical-minded Matty, who has often known him in the same frame of mind after a drinking-bout. She makes-believe, however, to take him, very coolly, at his word.

'Th' owd tale,' said hoo, an' laft her stoo';
'It's rayly past believin ;
Thee think o' th' world thea'rt goin' to,
An' lev this world to th' livin ;
What use to me can deeod folk be ?
Thae's kilt thisel' wi' spreein ;
An' if that's o' thae wants wi' me,
Get forrud wi' thi deein'.'

Pinder thereupon thinks better of it, and with the remark that 'eawr Matty gets as fause as one o' Pendle witches,' he reconsiders the situation and wisely determines to live on.

This passing reference to the Brocken of Lancashire, Pendle Hill, suggests a regret that Waugh made so little use of local superstitions for poetic purposes. He might have found a rich mine of ballad-material in the uncanny legends and eerie fancies still lingering in those nooks and recesses of his county where progress, as typified by the newspaper and the locomotive, has not yet quite abolished that 'over-belief'

which has been called the poetry of life. In 'Th' Goblin Parson' we have the true grotesque touch, but we are allowed to see from the first that the poet's intention is only mock-serious.

Then deawn bi' th' well i' th' fairy dell,
Wi' trees aboon it knittin,'
Where, near an' fur, ther nowt astir
But bats, i' th' eawl-leet flittin',
An' fearfu' seawnds that rustle 't reawnd
I' mony a goblin flitter,
As swarmin dark to flaysome wark
They flew wi' fiendish titter,—

Theer, reet anent, aw geet a glent
That brought a shiver o'er me,
For, fair i' th' track ther summat black
Coom creepin' on afore me:
It war not clear—but it war theer—
Wi' th' gloomy shadow blendin',
Neaw black an' slim, neaw gray an' grim,
Wi' neather side nor endin'.

These lines contain good examples of Waugh's picturesque taste in phraseology; the 'eawl-leet,' for the gloaming, would have delighted Keats or Coleridge, and in the trees 'knittin'' overhead we have an instance of the finding of the fortunate and perfect word.* Elsewhere we come upon

* I have since deliberately annexed this expression of Waugh's in some published verses of my own, trusting that no one would discover the nefarious deed unless I spontaneously confessed it.

W. W.

verbal felicities not less choice; the eastern side of the fold is 'th' mornin' side o' th' fowd'; someone with an abstracted, far-away expression of face is said to have 'looked very *yonderly* mony a day'; a man whose thoughts held nothing dark or covert is congratulated upon having 'no meawse neuks' (mouse corners) in his mind. Instances of the survival of old words that have long outgrown their first uses may be found in such expressions as 'Bi' th' Mass,' which Waugh has but transferred to his pages from the common talk of Lancashire farm labourers of to-day. 'Bi' th' Mon' is another ancient asseveration, understood to be an allusion to the Founder of Christianity. I myself have heard the somewhat more curious exclamation 'Bi' larrie,' which a Lancashire friend interprets as a corruption of 'By 'r Lady,' and which, like the oath 'By the Mass,' may be met with, though more rarely, in the talk of persons whose ancestry has been Protestant for centuries.

A word much used by Waugh is *marlock*,* meaning a frolic; and the noticeable frequency of its occurrence in his verse is hardly a pure

* So spelt by Waugh. In Yorkshire the word is pronounced măllack, the last syllable appearing to be connected with the north-country verb laik, to play.

accident, being very characteristic of a temperament which was fairly well developed on the festive and convivial side.

Then Mally, fill it up again,
An' dunnot look so deawldy;
Theer's nowt can lick a marlock, when
One's brains are gettin' meawldy.

Evidently our Lancashire singer shared the opinion which Burns expresses in his rather free paraphrase of the royal sage and voluptuary:

The cleanest corn that e'er was dight
May hae some piles o' caff in,
So ne'er a fellow creature slight
For random fits o' daffin.

We could ill spare Burns's 'fits o' daffin',' and Waugh's 'marlocks' are equally an indispensable feature of his poetic personality. He was, however, no roysterer—simply a man who did not, 'when God sends a cheerful hour, refrain'; who was not disposed to be too severe upon such of his erring fellows as overstept the wise limits he himself observed; and who, for his own part, liked fun, and was not even above letting it be known that he enjoyed eating and drinking. His views upon a question, the different bearings of which he must have seen pretty well illustrated in the daily life of his class—the 'Temperance'

question—are summed up with characteristic geniality in the lines—

> An' he that scorns ale to his victual
> Is welcome to let it aloan;
> There s some can be wise wi a little,
> An' some can be foolish wi' noan;
> An some are so quare i' their natur'
> That nowt wi' their stomachs agree;
> But he that would liefer drink wayter
> Shall never be stinted by me.

This comfortable habit of reconciling opposite points of view is not the way of those formidable persons who have strong convictions and definite conclusions upon all complex and difficult matters, but it is the easy-going good sense of a man who sees both sides of an argument. When Robin, of poaching proclivities, runs against the Squire, who tells him, 'This land belongs me, where you're stalking,' the poet's sympathies seem rather incongruously divided between the sacred rights of landlords and the fallen nature of poachers, though I fear it must be owned that the doer of evil has the best of it in the conflict of wits.

> Says Robin, 'Ye re reet, I'll be beawnd,
> But what's to be done, I caun't tell, sir,
> For I'm like to walk somebody's greawnd
> As I've noan 'at belongs to mysel', sir.'

Whereupon our poet's agrarian philosophy is summed up in this wise—

This lond it's a ticklesome lot;
To wrangle abeawt it's a blunder
For whether one own it or not
He'll very soon ha' to knock under.
Both landlords an' tenants mun flit;
Let's hope, without fratchin' an' frownin',
They'll let us walk on it a bit,
An' then lend us a bit to lie down in.

That last earthly boon, of having a little land lent us to lie down in, has now been accorded to Edwin Waugh.* His final days were clouded by a painful disease, but it is pleasant to know that his life must on the whole have been an agreeable one, passed as it was among his own people, whose goodwill, expressed in hearty greetings and vigorous hand-grasps, was more to him than fame. By the joint action of a few of his well-to-do friends, he was provided in later years with a small income, sufficient for his simple wants, these gentlemen receiving in return the proceeds of the collected edition of his writings in prose and verse; and he does not seem to have had at any time the hand-to-hand fight with poverty which far greater genius has often known. His

* This paper was written a few days after his death. W. W.

last home was at New Brighton, on the Cheshire shore of the estuary of the Mersey, a resort in summer of great numbers of the humbler class of Lancashire folk, whose dreams of earthly happiness seem bounded for the time by shooting-galleries, donkey rides, and other kindred joys. At the sight of this rough-and-tumble holiday-elysium the souls of some latter-day versifiers would have shuddered with æsthetic horror; but by half-an-hour's stroll Waugh could at any time reach a quiet hill-top and look southward over the lovely plain of Wirral to where, beyond the sands of Dee, the noble profile of mountainous Wales is silhouetted against the horizon. Besides, he was not the man to shudder at a shooting-gallery, any more than at the rough accent of the mill-operatives from Bury or Oldham, whose talk was no doubt an unfailing refreshment to him, and who may many a time have whistled the tune of 'Come Whoam to thi' Childer an' Me' without dreaming that he who wrote the verses was within hearing. This is perhaps as fitting an opportunity as I shall have for observing that such modifications of the Lancashire dialect as he unquestionably adopts, by way of a concession to the general reader, seem to me genuinely artistic. In comparing,

say, the writings of that eighteenth century worthy, 'Tim Bobbin'—or the extant Lancashire ballads of a somewhat later date, such as 'Jone o' Grinfilt' and its imitative progeny, or the speech of country-folk around Rochdale at the present day—with the diction of Waugh's songs, one sees that he has largely softened down the harshnesses of the original vernacular, though without sacrificing characteristic colour. The language is robbed of its terrors, while its local identity remains in all essentials virtually unimpaired. I say in all essentials; for in some minor particulars I venture to think he has rather inconsistently adapted his orthography to the non-peasant eye and ear, sometimes waiving certain peculiarities of pronunciation which at other times he is careful to indicate. Tennyson's method in 'The Northern Farmer' seems to me more strictly invariable.

I have said little about Waugh's faults, preferring to dwell upon his abundant merits. The worst fault of the non-dialect pieces is an occasional intrusion of the worn-out coinage of poetical diction. Phrases like 'the cloudless vault of heaven,' tolerable fifty years ago, try one's powers of endurance at this day.' In the dialect poems, no such irritating presence is ever

felt; but sometimes when he has to choose between two kinds of truth he sacrifices the higher to the lower. To take a typical instance—evening is for him the time

When th' layrock has finished his wark aboon.

Now nothing could be less suggestive of work than the lark's song; but, on the other hand, this is precisely the sort of expression a 'Lancashire lad' would use, so that the fault is one which has an obverse side of merit. This is clearly a case of being false to the central fact about the lark; but it is equally a case of being true to the habits of thought of a social class, a class in whose lives 'wark' occupies so large a space that it colours, not unpathetically, their conception of the wild creatures that neither toil nor spin. Here the virtue of an otherwise questionable method is that the poet, albeit at some cost of fidelity to virgin nature, establishes a link of sympathy between his audience and the skylark; an end which could not have been achieved by splendid imagery such as Shelley's, in which the bird is likened to 'a poet hidden in the light of thought,' to 'a high-born maiden in a palace tower,' to a glow-worm, and to a rose. In that great industrial region where the roar of machinery too

often deadens the voices of bird and brook, and the smoke of the factory defames the protesting sky, it is no little thing to have helped keep alive in the hearts of the toilers the love of very different scenes, happily not far distant even now from the grimiest centres of the cotton manufacture—where the trees are still 'knittin'' above the pathway, and the beetle sails booming athwart the 'eawl-leet,' and the 'rindlin' wayter' is yet unsullied by the refuse of the mill. To have done this, and to have touched with a lyric light the somewhat grey lives of the labouring multitude whose thoughts he understood and shared, are Waugh's best titles to honour, and they are titles that cannot be contested. Neither now nor hereafter is the lettered world likely to read his homespun verses ; but Lancashire sang them and loved them, and some of them are none the worse for having been worn threadbare by a populace that wore them next its heart.

## MR HARDY'S 'TESS OF THE D'URBERVILLES'

In this, his greatest work, Mr Hardy has produced a tragic masterpiece which is not flawless, any more than *Lear* or *Macbeth* is; and the easiest way of writing about it would be to concentrate one's attention upon certain blemishes of style, read the author a lecture upon their enormity, affect to be very much shocked and upset by some of his conclusions in morals, and conveniently shirk such minor critical duties as the attempt to abnegate one's prejudices, inherited or acquired; to estimate in what degree the author's undoubtedly impassioned ethical vision is steady and clear; and, while eschewing equally a dogmatic judicialism and a weak surrender of the right of private censorship, to survey the thing created, in some measure, by the light of its creator's eyes. What is called critical coolness seems, no doubt, on a cursory

view, an excellent qualification in a judge of literature; but true criticism, when it approaches the work of the masters, can never be quite cool. To be cool before the *Lear* or the *Macbeth* were simply not to feel *what is there;* and it is the critic's business to feel, just as much as to see. In so tremendous a presence, the criticism which can be cool is no criticism at all. The critical, hardly less than the creative mind, must possess the faculty of being rapt and transported, or its function declines into mere connoisseurship, the pedant's office of mechanical appraisement.

One may, however, feel the greatness of Mr Hardy's work profoundly, and yet be conscious of certain alloying qualities; but let it be said at once, such qualities are of the surface only. None the less, with respect to the over-academic phraseology which here and there crops up in this book, I myself have but one feeling—a wish that it were absent. This terminology of the schools is misplaced; I can feel nothing but regret for these nodosities upon the golden thread of an otherwise fine diction. In a certain sense they disturb a reader all the more for the very reason that they are *not*—like Mr Meredith's singularities of speech, for example—ingrained in the very constitution of the style and,

obviously, native to the author, nor are they so frequent as to become a habit, a characteristic mannerism which one might get used to; rather they are exceptional and excrescent—foreign to the total character of Mr Hardy's English—and serve no purpose but to impair the homogeneity of his utterance. The perfect style for a novelist is surely one which never calls attention to its own existence, and there was needed only the omission or modification of a score or two of sentences in these volumes to have assimilated the style of *Tess* to such an ideal. Nothing but gain could have resulted from the elimination of such phrases as 'his former pulsating flexuous domesticity.' Possibly Mr Hardy intends some self-reference of a defensive sort when he observes that 'advanced ideas are really in great part but the latest fashion in definition—a more accurate expression, by words in *logy* and *ism*, of sensations which men and women have vaguely grasped for centuries;' touching which, one is impelled to ask — Are the words in *logy* and *ism* necessarily more accurate instruments of thought than simpler phrases? Recalling the other memorable case in which a great novelist finally allowed her passion for elaborate precision of statement to metallicise an origin-

ally pliant style, one doubts if there was any truer psychological accuracy in the delineation of Deronda than in that of Silas Marner. Mr Herbert Spencer's diction is no doubt very accurate, but probably not more so than Lord Tennyson's.

Fortunately, however, *Tess* is a work so great that it could almost afford to have even proportionately great faults; and the faults upon which I have dwelt—perhaps unduly—are casual and small. Powerful and strange in design, splendid and terrible in execution, this story brands itself upon the mind as with the touch of incandescent iron. To speak of its gloom as absolutely unrelieved is scarcely correct. Dairyman Crick provides some genuine mirth, though not in too abundant measure; and 'Sir John,' with his 'skellingtons,' is a figure at once humorous and pathetic. But with these exceptions, the atmosphere from first to last is, indeed, tenebrous; and after the initial stroke of doom, Tess appears to us like Thea, in Keats's poem:

> 'There was a listening fear in her regard,
> As if calamity had but begun:
> As if the vanward clouds of evil days
> Had spent their malice, and the sullen rear
> Was with its storèd thunder labouring up.'

The great theme of the book is the incessant penalty paid by the innocent for the wicked, the unsuspicious for the crafty, the child for its fathers; and again and again this spectacle, in its wide diffusion, provokes the novelist to a scarcely suppressed declaration of rebellion against a supramundane ordinance that can decree, or permit, the triumph of such wrong. The book may almost be said to resolve itself into a direct arraignment of the morality of this system of vicarious pain—a morality which, as he bitterly expresses it, 'may be good enough for divinities,' but is 'scorned by average human nature.' Almost at the outset, this note of insurrection against an apparently inequitable scheme of things is struck, if less audaciously, upon our introduction to the Durbeyfield household. 'All these young souls were passengers in the Durbeyfield ship, entirely dependent on the judgment of the two Durbeyfield adults for their pleasures, their necessities, their health, even their existence. If the heads of the Durbeyfield household chose to sail into difficulty, disaster, starvation, disease, degradation, death, thither were these half-dozen little captives under hatches compelled to sail with them—six helpless creatures, who had never been asked

if they wished for life on any terms, much less if they wished for it on such hard conditions as were involved in being of the shiftless house of Durbeyfield.' In one way and another this implicit protest against what he cannot but conceive to be the maladministration of the laws of existence, this expostulation with 'whatever gods there be' upon the ethics of their rule, is the burden of the whole strain. And a joyless strain it is, whose theme is the havoc wrought by 'those creeds which futilely attempt to check what wisdom would be content to regulate;' the warfare of 'two ardent hearts against one poor little conscience,' wherein the conscience at last is calamitously victorious, the hearts rent and ruined; and, over all, like an enveloping cloud, 'the dust and ashes of things, the cruelty of lust, and the fragility of love.' Truly a stupendous argument; and in virtue of the almost intolerable power with which this argument is wrought out, *Tess* must take its place among the great tragedies, to have read which is to have permanently enlarged the boundaries of one's intellectual and emotional experience.

Perhaps the most subtly drawn, as it is in some ways the most perplexing and difficult

character, is that of Angel Clare, with his half-ethereal passion for Tess—'an emotion which could jealously guard the loved one against his very self.' But one of the problems of the book, for the reader, is involved in the question how far Mr Hardy's own moral sympathies go with Clare in the supreme crisis of his and Tess's fate. Her seducer, the spurious D'Urberville, is entirely detestable, but it often happens that one's fiercest indignation demands a nobler object than such a sorry animal as that; and there are probably many readers who, after Tess's marriage with Clare, her spontaneous disclosure to him of her soiled though guiltless past, and his consequent alienation and cruelty, will be conscious of a worse anger against this intellectual, virtuous, and unfortunate man than they could spare for the heartless and worthless libertine who had wrecked these two lives. It is at this very point, however, that the masterliness of the conception, and its imaginative validity, are most conclusively manifest, for it is here that we perceive Clare's nature to be consistently inconsistent throughout. As his delineator himself says of him: 'With all his attempted independence of judgment, this advanced man was yet the slave to custom and conventionality when surprised back into

his early teachings.' He had carefully schooled himself into a democratic aversion from everything connected with the pride of aristocratic lineage; but when he is suddenly made aware that Tess is the daughter of five centuries of knightly D'Urbervilles, he unfeignedly exults in her splendid ancestry. He had become a rationalist in morals no less than an agnostic in religion; yet no sooner does this emancipated man learn from his wife's own most loving lips the story of her sinless fall, than his affection appears to wither at the roots. 'But for the world's opinion,' says Mr Hardy, somewhat boldly, her experiences 'would have been simply a liberal education.' Yet it is these experiences which place her for a time outside the human sympathy of her husband, with all his fancied superiority to conventionalisms and independence of tradition. The reader pities Clare profoundly, yet cannot but feel a certain contempt for the shallowness of his casuistry, and a keen resentment of his harsh judgment upon the helpless woman—all the more so since it is her own meek and uncomplaining submission that aids him in his cruel punishment of her. 'Her mood of long-suffering made his way easy for him, and she herself was his best advocate.'

Considering the proud ancestry whose blood was in her veins, and the high spirit and even fierce temper she exhibits on occasion, one almost wonders at her absolute passivity under such treatment as he subjects her to; but the explanation obviously lies in her own unquestioning conviction of the justice of his procedure. One of Mr Hardy's especially poetic traits is his manner of sometimes using external Nature not simply as a background or a setting, but as a sort of superior spectator and chorus, that makes strangely unconcerned comments from the vantage-ground of a sublime aloofness upon the ludicrous tragedy of the human lot; and, in the scene of Tess's confession, a singularly imaginative effect is produced by kindred means, where Mr Hardy makes the very furniture and appurtenances of the room undergo a subtle change of aspect and expression as the bride unfolds her past, and brings Present and Future ruining about her head: 'Tess's voice throughout had hardly risen higher than its opening tone; there had been no exculpatory phrase of any kind, and she had not wept. But the complexion even of external things seemed to suffer transmutation as her announcement progressed. The fire in the grate looked impish—demoniacally funny,

as if it did not care in the least about her strait. The fender grinned idly, as if it too did not care. The light from the water-bottle was merely engaged in a chromatic problem. All material objects around announced irresponsibility with terrible iteration. And yet nothing had changed since the moments when he had been kissing her; or rather, nothing in the substance of things: but the essence of things had changed.' One detail of this scene strikes me as a crudity in art, though it may be a fact in nature. It is where she is suddenly aghast at the effect of her own confession: 'Terror was upon her white face as she saw it; her cheek was flaccid, *and her mouth had the aspect of a round little hole.*' This may be realism, but even realism is eclectic, and rejects more than it uses; and this is surely one of those non-essential touches which, drawing attention upon themselves, purchase a literal veracity at the expense of a higher imaginative verisimilitude.

After this, D'Urberville's re-intrusion upon her life, and his resumed mastery of it, are matters which, in their curious air of predestination, affect us somewhat in the manner of spectral interferences with human fates; and this impression is incidentally aided by the use made,

very sparingly—with that fine, suggestive parsimony which reveals the artist's hand—of the one preternatural detail, the legend of the D'Urberville coach and four. Thenceforward, as the tragedy climbs towards its last summit of desolation and doom, criticism in the ordinary sense must lie low, in the shadow of so great and terrible a conception.

There is one thing which not the dullest reader can fail to recognise—the persistency with which there alternately smoulders and flames through the book Mr Hardy's passionate protest against the unequal justice meted by society to the man and woman associated in an identical breach of the moral law. In his wrath, Mr Hardy seems at times almost to forget that society is scarcely more unjust than nature. He himself proposes no remedy, suggests no escape — his business not being to deal in nostrums of social therapeutics. He is content to make his readers pause, and consider, and pity; and very likely he despairs of any satisfactory solution of the problem which he presents with such disturbing power, and clothes with a vesture of such breathing and throbbing life.

## CRITICS AND THEIR CRAFT*

It is a rather disconcerting reflection, that while criticism, during the last fifty years, has been engaged in settling more or less permanently a great variety of questions, it has been gradually unsettling more and more the very important and, one would think, fundamental question of the nature, scope, and limitations of its own office. In the early days of the century, its conception of itself was tolerably clear. There was a general unanimity of opinion that a critic was primarily and above all else a judge. He himself never had any misgivings about that. He wore, with an air of judicial infallibility, the literary ermine; he grew grey in precedents; and he got into a habit of regarding authors generally as the accused in the dock. He was

*Portion of a review of Mr George Saintsbury's 'Essays in English Literature.'

responsible for some grave and even scandalous miscarriages of justice; not a few of his most famous damnatory sentences have been unequivocally annulled by posterity; but at least he held firmly and consistently the belief that his business was to interpret and administer the literary law, and that this law, though not susceptible of regular codification — being, indeed, unembodied in formal statutes — was yet in spirit clearly deducible from tradition and generally approved usage.

Such was the critical creed of a past generation. But even in the heyday of the old judicial or magisterial *régime*, even when the critical bench was occupied by Gifford or Brougham, by Jeffrey or Sydney Smith, by Wilson or Lockhart or Macaulay, there was in very active existence a race of singularly interesting writers, who, with strongly marked differences, resembled each other in their common antagonism to anything like organised authority. The word Radical, as appropriated by a section of the political world, is, as often as not, nearly meaningless; but that group of truly imaginative critics, in which Lamb and Hazlitt are the two towering figures, might justly have claimed to be exponents of Radical principles in literature. If they did not always

succeed in getting down to the roots of things, it was assuredly not for want of enthusiastic digging; and as they dug, their spades cast up buried trinkets, and golden coins on which the faces of forgotten kings were still majestic. These relics were often of sterling metal, and nobly engraved, but still their proper place was in a cabinet of antiquities, a virtuoso's collection, and Lamb's *Specimens* (the very word suggests a museum) was such a repository. The publication of this work in 1808—when Byron was twenty, Shelley sixteen, and Keats thirteen — may be regarded as the epoch-making manifesto of that opposition party in literature which continued to be led by Lamb and Hazlitt and Leigh Hunt, perhaps with something of the recklessness inseparable from opposition tactics. This party ultimately broke the power of the government, the able and eminently respectable government of the Giffords and Jeffreys, but its own object was not so much an accession to similar power—its whole bent and genius were much too informal, too consciously irregular for that — as the destruction of everything that savoured of official rule in matters of taste and æsthetics. It accomplished this object; it made a recognised seat of authority in criticism impossible; and it

brought the republic of letters to the condition which we now see, a state of unchartered freedom which sometimes makes us sigh for a paternal government again.

An oligarchy of critics, is, however, no longer practicable. The critics themselves have ceased to assume the *rôle* of public censor, have ceased to pose as the responsible guardians of law and order in literature. Unlike their predecessors, they are much given to discussing, with charming ingenuousness, the subject of their own craft, their own intellectual work and æsthetic mission. The terms 'author' and 'critic' used to represent a distinction so pointed as almost to be antithetical. At present they shade into each other imperceptibly. The critic becomes more and more his own topic, and the reader sometimes vaguely wonders whether criticism any longer implies the existence of something criticised.

It is always good to be with Mr Saintsbury, for he at least is a critic who keeps his object clearly in view, by taking care never to be preoccupied with a sense of his own clarity of vision. And he is so pleasantly free from nervous airs of responsibility. Without exactly having that 'light touch,' which is perhaps as much

over-valued just now as a ponderous ceremoniousness of literary manners was over-valued by our forefathers, he always avoids taking either his subjects, himself, or, one may add, his readers too seriously, and whatever faults he may be chargeable with, that of dull decorum certainly cannot be numbered amongst them. We have a feeling that if (say) the Archangel Gabriel had occupied his doubtless ample leisure with writing and publishing poetry, and Mr Saintsbury had undertaken to review it, his criticism would have betrayed no sign of his being in the least degree awed by the very exalted rank of the author. And while his attitude towards the writers whom he discusses may be described as one of easy yet respectful familiarity, his style is felicitously in accord with his attitude. It is a style which clearly pays no heed to dignity, yet we should hesitate to call it an undignified style, in any sense implying disparagement. Now such a style as Leigh Hunt's does really strike us as undignified in that sense, but the source of the impression is his loquacity, his prattling and fussing ways, not his contempt for starch and buckram. Beneath his jaunty, skittish airs there is some want of true inbred ease. In his light holiday attire he does not look a whit more

really comfortable than does Sir Thomas Browne in his trailing cloth of gold, starred with antique gems, and overwrought with cabalistic symbols. Mere ease of style often gets more credit than is its due. It is ease with power, or ease with splendour that is the valuable thing. Anybody can be at ease in a shooting jacket and knickerbockers, but to look comfortable in court-dress is distinction. Besides, after all, writing and talking are two quite distinct arts, and a chatty style is no more truly appropriate to literature than a literary style is to conversation. Starch and buckram are as foreign to Mr Saintsbury's wardrobe as to Hunt's; but Hunt, in eschewing stiffness, constantly falls into slatternliness, and goes about with hose down at heels, while Mr Saintsbury's arm-chair negligence of pose is at worst an agreeable mannerism, which pleasantly invites the reader to make himself similarly at home.

One is sometimes tempted to regret the decay of the noble art of slating, as practised by our great-grandfathers. Considered simply as a national sport and pastime, it had very real attractions. Of course, these were mainly for the practitioners of the art themselves, and the disinterested on-lookers; but, then, the same

might be said of many other manly diversions, from deer-stalking downwards. It was a case in which the individual agony of the victim might fairly be supposed to be balanced by the unmixed enjoyment of the public. For the latter, it was a truly exhilarating spectacle, and for the operator himself it must have been splendid exercise. One has to admit that the authors undergoing castigation seemed seldom able to sink their own egoism so as to enter fully and genially into the spirit of the thing, and they were too apt to forget that the original fault, the congenital offence, was after all their own, in being authors. The critic and the poet, especially, were like the gardener and the frog that we have heard of. 'I'll larn you to be a frog,' said the gardener, as he applied the hoe of extermination. But though the swashbuckler ways of a past generation of critics were rude, the half-contemptuous amiability of the latter-day reviewer must often be quite as bad to bear, besides being less medicinal to the soul. And if the old-fashioned dogmatic criticism, with its high-handed legislation, its imperial edicts—'to do thus and thus shall be lawful and right, to do otherwise shall be criminally wrong'—was not an unqualified service to good literature, we may be permitted

to doubt whether the modern creed of universal appreciation is in every way preferable to it. We cannot believe that he criticiseth best who loveth best all styles both great and small. Surely the best critic is he who, neither ashamed of admiring when he can, nor afraid of reprehending when he ought, does not ask the reader to take his admiration or reprehension on trust, but vindicates both, by adducing such reasons as in all ages have sufficed to demonstrate why masterpieces are masterpieces, and why failures are failures.

## LOWELL AS A CRITIC

CULTURED America, we believe, has not yet fully made up her mind as to who is her best poet; but we imagine that she could have little hesitation in pointing to Mr Lowell as her most brilliant 'all-round' literary representative. Emerson's mission, on his visits to these shores, was philosophical rather than literary; Hawthorne's was mainly a mission of silence; and Dr Holmes's, from all we could ever hear, a mission of dining. It is pre-eminently Mr Lowell who comes to us as his Excellency the Ambassador of American literature to the Court of Shakespeare. In mere versatility, one might perhaps find his equal, or his superior, among our own *littérateurs* of a past generation; but we do not know that any writer since Macaulay gives us so uniform an impression of that kind of vigour (at times rather rude vigour) which, as compared, for

instance, with the somewhat paroxysmal force of Carlyle, seems to have its counterpart in muscular as distinguished from nervous energy. As for the 'brilliance,' it is so great and so ubiquitous, that it pays the not inconsiderable penalty of diverting our attention from the real soundness that underlies it all. So dazzling is the flash, and at times so sharp the report, that we scarcely notice the straightness of the aim. Nay, as we see position after position stormed by such an onset of epigram, such a Rupert-charge of prancing simile and plume-tossing illustration, we are half-tempted to ask whether anything so *magnifique* can also be *la guerre*. There is something wonderfully reassuring in dulness, and it is a sort of reassurance which Mr Lowell persistently withholds.

He himself has more than once defined the intellectual staple of the best English poetry as 'understanding aerated by imagination.' His own critical prose seems rather the product of judgment aerated by wit. Nothing is too grave to be the cause of levity in Mr Lowell. Of Davenant's *Gondibert* we read, that 'almost everyone speaks of it, as commonly of the dead, with a certain subdued respect.' Presently it reminds him of Goldsmith's famous line: 'It is

remote, unfriendly (*sic*), melancholy, and, above all, slow.' Finally, 'its shining passages, for there are such, remind one of distress-rockets sent up at intervals from a ship about to founder, and sadden rather than cheer.' Indeed, Mr Lowell has a wicked way of being unseasonably profane in the presence of anything eminently respectable. Professor Masson's monumental biography of our great epic bard does not suggest particularly lightsome thoughts to most of us, but to Mr Lowell it is a 'history of the seventeenth century interrupted now and then by an unexpected apparition of Milton, who, like Paul Pry, just pops in and hopes he does not intrude.' When Mr Masson has been making a most praiseworthy attempt to explain the two-handed engine in *Lycidas*, all the thanks he gets from this heartless American are in the form of a request that he would be so good as to 'try his hand on the tenth horn of the beast in Revelation.'

But Mr Lowell the jester, though he keeps slyly nudging Mr Lowell the critic, and occasionally interrupting his master's serious discourse with the privileged impertinence of motley, is still a person of secondary interest, and it is with his master's utterances that we are

chiefly concerned. Everywhere in these pages we come upon the happiest critical characterisation, often condensed in a phrase or epithet,—as where he calls Spenser's style *Venetian*. Not but what there are exceptions to this felicity,—for example, we cannot think that the expression 'that benignant nature,' applied to Dryden, is an instance of the finding of the right word, any more than we can consider Mr Lowell's remark, 'I do not remember that he ever makes poverty a reproach,' to be a triumphant proof of Dryden's magnanimity as a satirist. Mr Lowell, of course, cannot have forgotten that the author of the *Achitophel* makes physical deformity, if not exactly 'a reproach,' at least an occasion for wantonly pitiless derision. Again, the following sentences—also referring to glorious John—appear curiously self-contradictory:—'There are continual glimpses of something in him greater than he, hints of possibilities finer than anything he has done. You feel that the whole of him was better than any random specimens, though of his best, seem to prove.' Here we are told, first, that parts of Dryden transcend Dryden; and next, that Dryden transcends his own finest parts. On the other hand, could anything be better than this answer to the question: Was

Dryden a great poet?—'Hardly, in the narrowest definition. But he was a strong thinker who sometimes carried commonsense to a height where it catches a diviner air, and warmed reason till it had well-nigh the illuminating property of intuition.'

Mr Lowell's catholicity is not his least excellence as a critic. He is equally at home with the facile rationalism of Pope, and the mysticism, tempered by mensuration, of Dante, nor does his admiration of Dante's frugality in words lessen his delight in Spenser's verbal profusion. Spenser's thoughts, he says finely, 'are never pithily expressed, but with a stately and sonorous proclamation, as if under the open sky, that seems to me very noble.' Perfect little crystallisations of criticism, like the foregoing, sparkle everywhere, sometimes huddled in clusters upon the blazing page. Very rarely the eye is caught by something that has a rather specious glitter, like the observation that 'mannerism is the wilful obtrusion of self, as style is its unconscious abnegation.' The immediate reference is to Shakespeare, of whose impersonal accent it seems to hold good; but we think there is some confusion of thought in making style and mannerism so antithetically opposed, for mannerism

is not so much inverted as perverted style. Besides, Milton, at least in his poems, though not in his prose, affords clear instances of the highest style being attained by a process having little in common with self-abnegation. In another place we find Mr Lowell saying, that Wordsworth 'had, in some respects, a deeper insight, and a more adequate utterance of it, than any man of his generation; but it was a piecemeal insight and utterance; his imagination was feminine, not masculine, receptive, and not creative.' Passing over the very odd phrase 'a piecemeal insight,' and the not very intelligible attribution of sex to imagination, may we ask Mr Lowell what a *receptive* imagination is like? Imagination, whether we understand it as 'the shaping spirit' which gives substance and prehensibility to the figments of the brain, or as a faculty of conjuration which 'calls forth spirits from the vasty deep' of mystery that mutters around the shores of commonplace, or as a transfiguring light which brings out the occult beauty and significance of the commonplace itself by apocalyptic flashes, is always something transitive, not passive,—or rather something which by turns creates, evokes, or merely illuminates, but never *receives*. To

the 'aerating' properties of imagination, Mr Lowell himself, as we have seen, elsewhere testifies.

Mr Lowell's forte is profusion, and his foible prodigality. His good things lie about in all directions, so temptingly, so portably, like the diamonds in Sindbad's valley, that a reviewer, in his hurry to fill his pockets and retire on the proceeds to Balsora, is apt to forget the larger aspects of that earth and sky which encompass him. But it is a teeming earth, and a bracing sky. In his directness of speech and broad heartiness of manner, Mr Lowell brings with him an air which, to use one of his own expressions, 'blows the mind clear.' It is delightfully fresh and tonic, with a certain saline shrewdness in it, reminding us that it has come across the ocean. Himself the product of American mother-wit and European culture, it is perhaps not too fanciful to think of him as especially happy when he treats of authors who themselves show traces of composite literary nationality, — of Dryden, with his thoroughly English temperament subdued to Gallic modes, his suit of Norwich drugget, as it were, prankt with Valenciennes lace ; of Spenser, the child of the English Reformation and the Italian Renascence;

of Chaucer, whose laurel opens its leaves in northern air, but strikes root southward towards Boccaccio's garden. If Mr Lowell is anywhere comparatively unsatisfactory, it is in the paper on Wordsworth. Not that he imperfectly appreciates Wordsworth's power, but he gives the reader an uneasy feeling that, the hub of the universe being notoriously where it is, Boston is secretly disposed to resent those pretensions to cosmic centricity which *do* now and then appear to be put forward by Rydal. A certain want of flexibility observable in Wordsworth himself seems for once to beget a like defect in his critic, who certainly shows less than his usual gift of establishing intimate and confidential relations with his author. Nor is this the only case, perhaps, in which the reader is reminded that Mr Lowell's is not invariably the ideal critical method. When some minds would circumvent a subject with noiseless approaches, and worm its reluctant secret out of it insidiously, he challenges it to a decisive engagement in open field, where swords flash in the brave sunlight, and hot sparks are struck from dinted armour. But the method granted—and it is a picturesque and robust method—his mastery of it is indisputable.

## COLERIDGE'S SUPERNATURALISM

It is usual to think of Coleridge the metaphysician as directly responsible for the gradual supersession, if not extinction, of Coleridge the bard; and it is clear that he himself, at a comparatively early date, was conscious of—and not unalarmed at—the growing ascendency exercised by his philosophical over his creative powers. It is in 1802, when he has still thirty-two years of life before him, that he acknowledges himself in the singular position of a man unable, so to speak, to get at his own genius or imagination except by a circuitous route,—*viâ* his intellect.

> 'By abstruse research to steal
> From my own nature all the natural man,—'

this, he says, has become his 'sole resource,' his 'only plan,'

> 'Till that which suits a part infects the whole,
> And now is almost grown the habit of my soul.'

But although his speculative faculty did ultimately dominate and overbear his poetic powers, we are inclined to think there was a time when it co-operated with them not disloyally. One is a little apt to forget that his metaphysical bent was no less innate than his poetical,—even at Christ's Hospital, his spiritual potation was a half-and-half in which the waters of a more or less authentic Castaly, and the 'philosophic draughts' from such fountains as Jamblichus and Plotinus, were equally mingled. Whether or not a born 'maker,' he was certainly a born theorist; and we believe not only that under all his most important artistic achievements there was a basis of intellectual theory, but that the theory, so far from being an alien and disturbing presence, did duty as the unifying principle which co-ordinated the whole. We think we can see such a theory underlying *The Ancient Mariner*, and securing the almost unqualified imaginative success of that poem; and we further think we can see it departed from in one isolated instance, with temporary artistic disaster as the result.

Anyone examining the poem with a critical eye for its machinery and groundwork, will have noticed that Coleridge is careful not to

introduce any element of the marvellous or 'supernatural' until he has transported the reader beyond the pale of definite geographical knowledge, and thus left behind him all those conditions of the known and the familiar, all those associations with recorded fact and experience, which would have created an inimical atmosphere. Indeed, there is perhaps something rather inartistic in his undisguised haste to convey us to the æsthetically necessary region. In some half-dozen stanzas, beginning with 'The ship was cleared,' we find ourselves crossing the Line and driven far towards the Southern Pole. Beyond a few broad indications thus vouchsafed, Coleridge very astutely takes pains to avoid anything like geography. We reach that silent sea into which we are the first that ever burst, and that is sufficient for imaginative ends. It is enough that the world, as known to actual navigators, is left behind, and a world which the poet is free to colonise with the wildest children of his dreaming brain, has been entered. Forthwith, to all intents and purposes, we may say, in the words of Goethe as rendered by Shelley :—

> 'The bounds of true and false are passed ;—
> Lead us on, thou wandering gleam.'

Thenceforth we cease to have any direct relations with the verifiable. Natural law is suspended, standards of probability have ceased to exist. Marvel after marvel is accepted by us, as by the Wedding-Guest, with the unquestioning faith of 'a three years' child.' We become insensibly acclimatised to this dreamland. Nor is it the chaotic, anarchic, incoherent world of arabesque romance, where the real and unreal by turns arbitrarily interrupt and supplant each other, and are never reconciled at heart. On the contrary, here is no inconsistency, for with the constitution of *this* dream-realm nothing except the natural and the probable could be inconsistent. Here is no danger of the intellect or the reason pronouncing an adverse judgment, for the venue has been changed to a court where the jurisdiction of fantasy is supreme. Thus far then, the Logic of the Incredible is perfect, and the result, from the view point of art, magnificent. But at last we quit this consistently, unimpeachably, most satisfactorily impossible world; we are restored to the world of common experience; and when so restoring us, the poet makes his first and only mistake. For the concluding miracle, or rather brace of miracles—the apparition of the angelic forms standing over

the corpses of the crew, and the sudden preternatural sinking of the ship—take place just when we have returned to the province of the natural and regular, to the sphere of the actual and the known; just when, floating into harbour, we sight the well-remembered kirk on the rock, and the steady weathercock which the moonlight steeps in silentness. A dissonant note is struck at once. We have left a world where prodigies were normal, and have returned to one where they are monstrous. But prodigies still pursue us with unseasonable pertinacity, and our feeling is somewhat akin to that of the Ancient Mariner himself, whose prayer is that he may either 'be awake' or may 'sleep alway.' We would fain either surrender unconditionally to reality, or remain free, as naturalised citizens of a self-governing dreamland.

If *The Ancient Mariner* is the finest example in our literature, of purely fantastic creation—and we think it is—the First Part of *Christabel* is not less wonderful in its power of producing an equally full and rich effect by infinitely more frugal means. In *Christabel*, there is nothing extravagant or bizarre, no mere imaginative libertinism, nothing that even most distantly suggests a riot of fancy. The glamour, every-

where present, is delicate, elusive, impalpable, curiously insidious,—the glamour of 'enchantments drear, where more is meant than meets the ear.' Acute critics seem to have felt from the first that the very essence of the unique attraction exercised by this poem lay in its obscurity, its enigmatical character,—that its fascination was pre-eminently the fascination of the impenetrable. Charles Lamb dreaded a 'continuation' which should solve the riddle—and break the spell: which should light up—and destroy—this costly and faultless fabric of mystery. His fears (he was eventually reconciled to the 'continuation' by the inimitable passage on divided friendship) were only too well justified. In the Second Part, Coleridge does not actually vulgarise his shadowland by letting in commonplace daylight; but he distinctly goes some little way in that direction. It is not merely a falling-off in the quality of the workmanship—(although there *is* a falling off of that sort,- the poetry, as such, is still very fine)—but the whole basis, environment, and atmosphere of the First Part were magical,—and were homogeneous. The conditions of time and place were purely ideal; there was no uncomfortable elbowing of Wonder by Familiarity; the clumsy foot of

Fact did not once tread upon the rustling train of Romance. But we turn to the continuation —we enter the second chamber of this enchanted palace—and we are met at the threshold by the dull and earthy imp, Topography. Since writing his First Part, Coleridge has removed to Keswick, and so, forsooth, when he resumes his story, we hear of Borrowdale and Langdale, of Bratha-Head and Dungeon-Ghyll. The subtlest part of the illusion is gone: the incursion of accidents has commenced, and the empire of fantasy is threatened. The notable thing is, that the point where the air of fine strangeness and aloofness ceases to be sustained, is precisely the point where the impression of *mere unreality* begins to make itself obtrusively felt. There has been conceded to us just that foothold in *terra firma* which affords a basis for the leisurely delimitation of *terra incognita*. And, truth to tell, the poet has not really taken up again his abandoned thread. How could he? It was a filament of fairy gossamer, and he has endeavoured to piece it with what is, after all, only the very finest silk from the reel.

## THE MYSTERY OF STYLE

THERE can be no doubt that Style is the great antiseptic in literature—the most powerful preservative against decay. Innumerable have been the authors whom a plentiful outfit of good ideas, of intellectual force, of moral impulse, and of many other admirable things, could not save from extinction; but there is not one solitary instance of a writer who, endowed with Style in a really eminent measure, has been consigned to that great literary catacomb where thousands of heads which once teemed with thought and emotion are ranged in monotonous rows, and are become mere indistinguishable skulls. Lethe has its million victims; but though you should go down to its margin with deliberate suicidal intent, if you have Style, with that life-belt you cannot drown.

When I say Style, however, I mean something

quite distinct from *a style*. Many a 'man with a style' has perished. But that peculiarly distinguished air and carriage which we name Style is a mark of the purest mental aristocracy, the most untainted intellectual blue-blood—it speaks of long and high descent, of noble spiritual ancestry—and we can no more forget its possessors than we can forget some grand countenance seen by chance among a thousand unmemorable faces. The truth is, Style is high-breeding. What is it that we admire in a splendid horse, as it arches its neck and lifts its magnificent limbs? It is Style; it is a lofty bearing, inherited from select and distinguished progenitors; and it is essentially the same quality that we admire in the verse of Milton. In both cases, the step, the pose, are at least half the secret.

It does not necessarily imply transcendent beauty. Milton—admittedly and indisputably our highest summit in Style—is no doubt less perfectly beautiful than Tennyson. In the same way, we constantly speak of certain women as having Style, and we do not always imply pure beauty, except in so far as these very qualities of fine bearing and exquisite motion are themselves beautiful. What we do imply

when we speak of a horse, or a woman (my lady readers must forgive this collocation), or a poem, as having Style, is a certain crowning attribute which we recognise instinctively as the result and sum of various essentially aristocratic qualities which fuse in perfect harmony and rhythm. Serenity—by which I do not for a moment mean languor or apathy—but serenity based upon strength, is one of these qualities. Thus, a fussy person has no Style; a loquacious person has no Style; an over-eager person has no Style. And in literature the analogy holds good: Mr Browning had a style, a very remarkable one, but of Style he is absolutely destitute, for his literary manner is one of rapid volubility and constant eagerness—qualities eternally opposed to dignity, to Style, whose very essence is its proud way of never pressing itself upon you. Mr Matthew Arnold spoke of Richelieu as 'a man in the grand style,' and there are—or at all events there have been—peoples also in the grand style. The Romans were eminently such a people; the Germans are emphatically not — which illustrates once again the truth that Beauty and Style are not necessarily identical, for the Greeks were not so much a people in the grand style as the Romans,

yet they were a people intoxicated with beauty, who seem almost to have lived for beauty and nothing else. And speaking of the Germans, their quite unique want of Style as a people—for in no other European nation, equally great and intelligent, is the want so marked—reflects itself disastrously in their literature, which, with all its wealth of ideas and its monumental solidity, remains on the whole curiously lacking in charm, in allurement, in magnetism, because, with two or three splendid exceptions, its masters are fatally to seek in the one thing which is literature's salvation—Style.

A high general level of Style may undoubtedly be attained in some cases by self-conscious literary science; but the highest never can. A certain touch of *hauteur* is perhaps inseparable from Style in its most impressive manifestations; an accent as of command may usually be heard in it. Thus frankly democratic poets, like Burns, are without Style, properly so called. One of the characteristics of that order of poets is absence of reserve, whereas we have a feeling that Style always holds something back, never quite lets itself go. Probably passion *plus* self-restraint is the moral basis of the finest Style. Indeed, indignation is often a fruitful source of

Style. The best oratory usually has a background of anger, or a foundation in anger. You can hardly get beyond Isaiah for magnificent Style, and wrath is one of its chief constituents. Landor speaks of Dante as having 'that splenetic temper which seems to grudge brightness to the flames of hell,' and this temper is no doubt at the root of much of Dante's impressiveness. But he had another gift which can hardly be excelled in its power of making for Style—the gift, at times, of a transcendent brevity and simplicity. Invariably, when a fact in itself impressive is stated with absolutely unsurpassable simplicity, Style results. 'Rachel weeping for her children, *because they are not.*' This is infinitely more impressive than any phrase like 'because they are dead' could have been; and why? 'Because they are dead' would convey a latent impression of the children still existing as corpses—an impression which is narrowed and distracted by ideas of a merely gruesome kind, ideas of corruption and decay. 'Because they are not' suggests only the awful and tremendous mystery of annihilation—obliterated existence—and leaves no room for smaller, lower ideas or emotions. This is sublimity. This is style. Yet we must not leap to the conclusion that Style is

necessarily simple. It is a power that masks itself in many forms—in pomp no less than in simplicity, in allusiveness no less than in directness. The one thing which constitutes its unity in diversity—which makes all developments of style, however disparate in appearance, at heart akin—is, that it 'nothing common does, or mean,' that its very life and soul are its remoteness from the vulgar, the plebeian, its inalienable aristocracy of birth and breeding.

Style, as distinct from *a style*, is never in a hurry. When we have before us a book like Bacon's *Essays*, we insensibly fall into a trick of reading slowly, in sympathetic response to the writer's own grand leisureliness. We are content to hang upon his lips. His mere tones charm us. Now we always read Macaulay rather fast—stimulated no doubt by his own rapidity of mental movement. He and Bacon are typical illustrations of the difference between a *style* and Style.

The writers who equably and invariably achieve good Style are not those who ever attain to its highest reaches. Lord Tennyson illustrates this. And the same remark applies to literary periods characterised by a general prevalence of good style. Dr Johnson once said to

Boswell, 'Everybody writes well now.' An equally exacting judge would hardly say so at the present day, when a generally diffused styleless ness is one of the features of literature. Yet Johnson had only one contemporary whose Style was great; while we, who have not a Burke, have yet a Ruskin, a Pater, a Froude, and until lately had a Newman. And perhaps the general level of style was worst of all in Milton's time, when some of the finest masters were living—masters who understood the value of suspensions, discords, obstructions, as incidents of Style. Too great evenness, too uniform mellifluousness, is always a mistake. Occasional boulders impeding the stream, and thereby provoking it to splendid sudden energies—these things give variety and picturesqueness. The vice of Macaulay's style is its unrelieved facility, its uniform velocity.

I cannot help reverting yet once more to Milton, because he best proves the truth that in poetry Style is the paramount and invincible force. What else is the secret of his supremacy among our poets—a supremacy which no poet can doubt, and no true critic of poetry? For pure poetic endowment he sits unapproached on England's Helicon; yet, in comparison with

Shakespeare, it cannot be said that his is a very rich or large nature uttering itself through literature. He has no geniality, he has no humour; he is often pedantic, sometimes pedagogic. Although his Invention was stupendous, in the quite distinct and finer quality of Imagination, or contagious spiritual vision, he has superiors; his human sympathies were neither warm nor broad; Shakespeare's contempt for the mass of mankind may be hesitatingly inferred from casual evidences, but Milton's is everywhere manifest. The people are 'the common rout,' who

> . grow up and perish as the summer fly,
> Heads without name, no more remembered.'

When he half-contemptuously flings a political pamphlet to this nameless aggregation, he is avowedly 'casting pearl to hogs.' The only human beings in whom he exhibits much interest are kings and heroes, poets and legislators and philosophers, and

> '. . such as Thou hast solemnly elected,
> With gifts and graces eminently adorned,
> To some great work, Thy glory.'

Again, though the Action in an epic poem is proverbially of prime importance, this great

epic poet is not great in describing action—witness those notorious failures, the angelic battles, only partially rescued from dulness by their absurdity. And if he is poor in action, he is equally so in passion, notwithstanding his own express edict that 'poetry should be simple, sensuous, passionate.' With all these limitations, which look rather serious, wherein lies his easy supremacy? The answer is as obvious as it is indisputable:—he excels all other English poets in his familiarity with the secrets of that eternally fascinating mystery—the Mystery of Style.

## MR R. H. HUTTON

To discuss Mr Richard Holt Hutton's work in criticism — either literary, political, or ethical criticism—is practically to discuss the *Spectator*. Probably no other case of equally close identification of a great organ of opinion with the spiritual personality of its editor can be adduced. In fact, Mr Hutton is the *Spectator*. Professor Earle, in his fine work on English Prose — speaking of those newspapers that have what he calls 'a corporate style,' a style of impersonal individuality—cites the *Spectator* as the most remarkable example of a journal which, for any diversity of tone or manner or attitude you can detect in its articles, might be written by one man from cover to cover. The production of such an impression is certainly a triumph of the art of editing. In such a case the 'we' becomes something more than a mere journal-

istic convention; the reader has really a feeling as though he were listening to something more authoritative than the irresponsible *ipse dixit* of any single writer, however able and distinguished. Even if he happens to know something as to who are the actual contributors (for they are men, even like unto ourselves), it hardly occurs to him to indulge in private speculation as to the possible authorship of a particular leader or review. It is not Mr So-and-so who writes the article in question; it is the *Spectator*, or the *Times*, or the *Standard* which speaks—for each of these journals possesses one of those 'corporate styles' alluded to by Professor Earle. Such a unity and homogeneity of accent can only result when the contributors are all—perhaps unconsciously—assimilated into vital intellectual harmony with their chief, whose idiosyncrasy must be in some subtle way imposed upon his staff, not in the sense of causing them to write insincerely, and utter opinions other than their own, clothed in a style foreign to their own natural manner, but yet in a sense which does imply that they are not speaking solely for themselves in their capacity as separate thinking units, but that the presiding influence is also speaking through

them. There can be no doubt about the superior weight and impressiveness thus produced, the additional confidence thus inspired. The world is wiser than its wisest man, and on substantially the same principle, though on a lower scale, the dictum of the *Times* or the *Spectator* is more authoritative than the utterance of the ablest writer in the *Spectator* or the *Times*.

So far as I know, Mr Hutton has not republished in collected form any of his own writings in the periodical with which he is so pre-eminently associated, and no doubt his abstinence from so doing has contributed to the preservation of that effect of oneness, that air of cohesion, that manifest intellectual fusion, which any visible emergence of himself from his own literary organ might conceivably, in some degree, distract or impair. But the two volumes of essays reprinted from the old *National Review* (not an ancestor of the existing *National Review* of Mr Alfred Austin) and the volume of estimates of political notabilities, recovered from the *Pall Mall Gazette* of an almost pre-historic period, when the politics of that journal were somewhat other than they are to-day—these books bear their author's name on the title-pages, and it is interesting to note in

them certain divergences in point of style, not only from the style Spectatorial, but from each other. The *National Review* papers being larger in scale, are more expansive (by which I do not at all mean discursive) in style, than is the typical *Spectator* article of to-day; while the style of the *Pall Mall* articles is more crisply epigrammatic.

When one passes to Mr Hutton's expressly literary studies, one can hardly resist the conviction that his heart is there, though much of his *mind* is elsewhere engaged. No literary critic is so great as to be without limitations, and I venture to think that Mr Hutton does not invariably do full justice to literary power *per se*, when dissociated from any spiritual force such as makes for man's ennoblement and moral quickening. Thus he says: 'There is but one passage in all Shelley's exquisite poetry which rises into pure sublimity—because power is of the essence of sublimity, and Shelley had no true sense of power . . . the passage in which he puts into Beatrice Cenci's heart the sudden doubt lest the spiritual world be without God after all.'

Now I should have thought that Mr Hutton would have found the closing portion of

'Adonais' more sublime; and, incidentally, I cannot but think that although the observation that 'power is of the essence of sublimity' is doubtless true enough, it is only a part of the truth, for although power is implied in sublimity, the chief constituent of the Sublime seems more often to be something less active, less directly energised, than pure power. A mood of rapturous contemplation in a poet may have sublime issues, and although some form of power may be at the base of such a mood, it is not necessarily one of the visible and direct agencies towards a given sublime effect. Subtle as is the essay on 'Shelley's Poetic Mysticism,' many a reader, not impeachable on the ground of Shelleyolatry, must have wished that the critic had surrendered himself more willingly to the spell of this poet's peculiar beauty, to his aërial passion, his white flame of transcendental ardour. When, however, we turn to the essay on Wordsworth, we feel at once that no such adequate appraisement of that poet's genius —no estimate at once so generous and so discriminating, so reverent and so judicial—had previously appeared; while, with regard to George Eliot—whose genius there has latterly been a foolish fashion of decrying by means

of purely arbitrary objections to certain perfectly legitimate methods of artistic procedure —Mr Hutton's part has been that of seer rather than of mere critic.

But praise of a veteran like Mr Hutton is almost an impertinence, and I would rather fall back upon the *Spectator*, which is no doubt capable of surviving the most infelicitous eulogy. Also I dare not touch even the fringe of Mr Hutton's theological studies. Theology lies somewhat outside my province; and I feel that I can safely leave it to Mrs Humphry Ward, who employs it so pleasantly to lighten the austerity of fiction. Writing many years ago of Mr W. E. Forster, Mr Hutton credited that statesman with 'the invaluable habit of mind which can respectfully recognise an opinion wherever found as *de facto* power,' and of Mr Bright he said (in an equally remote past): 'He can never feel sufficient sympathy with an opponent's view to attempt to convince him: all he does is to inspire his followers with enthusiasm and his foes with wrath.' These sentences suggest, more or less directly, what is, I believe, generally admitted to be one of the *Spectator's* honourable distinctions—its anxiety to see the opposite side, to

do justice to its opponent's view, even going so far as to state that view, as if with the deliberate object of putting it effectively: of course, proceeding, without unnecessary delay, to explode it even more effectively still. Misrepresentation is always easier than argument, and in an age when journalism rather frequently takes the easier course, a consistent and scrupulous avoidance of any form of either direct or oblique mendacity is probably the *moral* quality which, more than any other, has made the *Spectator* the most entirely respected newspaper printed in the English language. The same virtue of straightforward and unfaltering honesty is no doubt at the root of Mr Hutton's power as a literary critic. We feel that here is a mind of great opulence, which yet positively refuses to deploy its forces for the mere purpose of intellectual parade or display. It is, perhaps, almost *too* engrossed in the more serious object of capturing the coy and elusive truth; and not the truth which is minor and subsidiary, but the truth of most value and moment to the human soul. In the presence of aims so strenuous and high, the art of turning a pretty sentence, which often means a brilliantly idle and irrelevant sentence, is not unnaturally held

cheap. Indeed, the *Spectator* has all along been a force—less in the sense of aggression than of passive resistance—making against the school which erects mere skill of pen into a disproportionate salience in our view of the ends and functions of literature. And time has apparently justified the *Spectator's* quietly resolute attitude, for since, let us say, the death of Rossetti, nothing has been more marked than the rapid decadence of that theory of writing which would elevate a phrase above an emotion, and a sounding line above a noble thought.

## MR AUSTIN DOBSON'S HOGARTH

THE eighteenth century is undoubtedly much better understood and more justly appraised at this moment than was possible fifty years ago. In their different ways, Mr Lecky, Mr Leslie Stephen, Mr Courthope, Mr Traill, and Mr Austin Dobson himself may be cited as critics who appreciate the eighteenth century in a sense which was impossible while the re-action against its spirit was still in force. Nevertheless, we have to this day a certain self-complacent habit of treating the eighteenth century as lacking in seriousness and given over to superficiality. In literature and ethics, its note was certainly cynicism, and cynicism usually implies shallowness. The evolution of an age has many parallels with the history of an individual, and just as a career of dissolute pleasure begets a torpor of heart and atrophy of soul in the jaded

debauchee, so the eighteenth century coming after a period of wanton riot and indulgence, is distinctly the sated *roué* among the centuries, with the sated *roué's* disbelief in heroism or any lofty virtue, his politely contemptuous patronage of woman as a pretty plaything, and his superiority to any strong emotions such as might unpleasantly ruffle the repose of his egoistic materialism. At the same time, even though we may refuse to see much earnestness or profundity in the ethical temper of that age, as a whole, one thing is certain—a prevalent ethical *bent*, whether true or false, deep or shallow, serious or flippant, is one of its most marked characteristics from first to last. Take the great trio of writers who eclipse all others at its commencement. Addison, with his genial, urbane irony, and his graceful reconciliation of this world and the next, was quite as serious a moralist as the rules of elegant society permitted. Pope had his eye constantly upon the moral aspects of life, though the spectacle stirred in him no emotion other than contemptuous, and he regarded creation chiefly as material for epigram. Swift himself, to whom nothing was sacred, and for whom beauty existed only that he might bemire it, and goodness that he

might sully it with shame, was still an inverted moralist, and outside the domain of morals has no definitive place. Young was a homilist in blank verse; Thomson wrote with a certain artificial unction about nature, but only really rose into poetry in his beautiful moral allegory; Gray's own apostrophe of himself as 'poor moralist!' is sufficiently apposite; Richardson, the only novelist who achieved something approaching cosmopolitan vogue, was didactic to the core; Johnson was not less a moralist than a scholar; and Cowper, with whose death the century closed, was as edifying a teacher as he was a charming poet. Is it not appropriate and becoming, that the century should also have produced the satirist whose painted or engraved sermons are the most powerfully impressive of all examples of moralised art?

Mr Dobson has given us biographies of both Hogarth and Fielding, and one cannot but think of the curious contrast between the work of the two friends. It is true they both depicted the vices and follies of their age, and with equal masterliness, but in a spirit how profoundly diverse! Fielding is the good-humoured, diverted spectator of the comedy of life, who declines to see in life anything but comedy.

Without being an immoral writer, of malice aforethought, he is ready to acquiesce in any immorality to which a lenient tradition imputes a certain 'manliness. Essentially kind-hearted, he is, of course, aware that self-indulgence always, in the long run, implies victims, and is, in the last resort, cruel; but, in his easy affability, he simply begs to be excused from looking so far ahead. Vice in men never shocks him, and in women it amuses him. Lady Booby's frailties, Booth's conjugal disloyalties, even the unsavoury episode of Lady Bellaston, cannot move him to active disgust. *His* Rake's Progress is, on the whole, a triumphal march through a tolerant, and even admiring, world. When we pass to Hogarth, it is almost like turning from the full-blooded animalism of Rubens to the fantastic horror of the 'Dance of Death.' Even when it is the comedy of life that he, too, depicts, there is always a play within the play, and it is a tragedy. The lurking terribleness beneath the sleek surface of things, the skeleton within the rosy flesh, is his theme. Although his works are full of ludicrous detail, it is the tragic and terrible ludicrousness of a world where men drink and make merry with the sexton who is digging their graves. It is this

which gives to his conceptions, even when they are most prosaic in their realism, that spectral air upon which some of his critics have commented. And when his themes, and the treatment of them, are comically absurd, we have a feeling that he himself does not join in the laugh: we insensibly impute to him a certain *vigilant aloofness*, as of the chorus to a dramatic action. Nor are we sure that he himself has tears for his own tragedies: there is a kind of pitiless serenity in his tremendous emphasis and lurid literalness. He is perhaps, morbid, somewhat as a dramatist like Webster is morbid, who stands too persistently and wilfully in the gaunt shadow which lust and hatred throw across life—his vision is certainly, by preference, partial and fragmentary—but he redresses the balance in an art-world composed of ideal Claudesque landscapes, Arcadian pastorals on porcelain, self-contented ladies and gentlemen by Sir Joshua, and humorously stupid Dutch boors. And in a degree implying the truest poetic temperament, he is of the symbol-loving order of minds who speak instinctively in parable. As truly as Spenser, or Bunyan, Blake or Dürer, Quarles or Swedenborg, he is impelled to utter himself by signs and metaphors. His works are crowded with

concrete hints and allegorical suggestion. Mr Dobson speaks of his 'detestation of indirectness and redundancy'; but although he is never redundant, we think a certain magnificent indirectness is one of his salient traits. A notable example of it occurs in that wonderful print representing the Old Cock-Pit in St James's Park where the incident of the defaulter who, 'in compliance with cock-pit law,' is being drawn up to the ceiling in a basket, is told solely by the man's shadow being silhouetted on the floor, the outline exhibiting him in the attitude of offering his watch and chain to appease his creditors. The cobweb that covers the slot of the poor-box, the crack that runs through the Ninth Commandment, in Old Marylebone Church, where the ruined profligate is being married to the ugly and elderly heiress; the houses in 'Gin Lane,' which, as Lamb says, seem 'absolutely to reel' in sympathy with the inebriate spirit of the place; the black boy, who 'significantly touches the horns of an Actæon' in Plate IV of 'Marriage à la Mode'—together with innumerable other instances — might be adduced to illustrate Hogarth's imaginative method of mingling oblique with direct narrative, and supplementing statement by allusion.

'I KNOW of nothing,' says Mr Archer, 'that need be said in the way of preface to *Hedda Gabler* —of nothing, indeed, that *can* be said without trenching upon criticism.' It is equally true that nothing can be said about Ibsen's work as a whole or about any part of it without opening up the entire subject of the legitimacy or illegitimacy of his methods, the worth or unworth of his art. All critical philosophy is implicated in any judgment that can be passed upon this writer—nay, more, he seems to demand a new criticism in response to his new creation. Old canons, accepted theories, applied to him, become pedantries of literary law; tradition snaps short in his hands; he himself convenes the court by which he is to be tried. The plays themselves, too, defy conventional classification (I am speaking of the 'modern dramas' which are his character-

istic achievement). Their diction, their details, their general setting are akin to comedy; their elements, for the most part are more profoundly tragic than the sorrows or crimes of any 'buskined stage' known to history. The terrible ludicrousness of life—that is their prevailing theme; the awful helplessness of individual will—that is the salient note of their monotonously insistent burden. 'Morbid—unwholesome—he tells us of nothing but what it is the business of art to forget;' this will be one reader's verdict. 'But is what he tells us true!—is he faithful to the facts of life?' says another; 'and if so, who are you that presume to prescribe to the dramatist what side of life he shall depict, what aspects of it he shall ignore?' And this brings us to the root and core of the whole matter. If the ultimate end of art is beauty of some sort—whether moral or spiritual, or merely æsthetic beauty—he is not an artist. He shows us little but the ugliness of things; the colour seems to fade out of the sunset, the perfume seems to perish from the rose, in his presence. But if power and impressiveness are their own justification, Ibsen is justified; for whatever else he may or may not be, he is powerful, he is impressive. To those enthusiasts, however, who

would place him on an equality with the greatest dramatists, sane and sober criticism can only reply, 'No; this narrow intensity of vision, this preoccupation with a part of existence, is never the note of the masters: they deal with life; he deals only with death-in-life. They treat of society; he treats only of the rottenness of society. Their subject is human nature—his, human disease.' And, in truth, his purview is partial and fragmentary. In the palace of life his concern is with the skeleton-cupboard alone; or, if he looks out upon the landscape, his attention is at once monopolised by a dead dog putrifying under the window. One's creed may not be that of amiably easy optimists like Leigh Hunt, who wrote—

> 'Good is as hundreds, evil as one:
> Round about goeth the golden sun.'

But one may, nevertheless, recognise the fact that 'piecemeal vision' is sure to bear false witness, and that there is really no truth except the whole truth. The masters of literature are universal explorers and adventurers; they do not deliberately beat about for ever in a little creek or inlet, and call that navigating the world. Literature, properly, has not anything to do with

the sort of burrowing specialism which is Ibsen's strength and weakness. Goethe has been called 'physician of the Iron Age,' but he was not a physician whose interest in therapeutics was limited to the treatment of consumption or cancer. Artists like Ibsen turn the House of Life into a moral hospital, and see nothing in men and women but interesting 'cases.'

For my own part, however, I am glad to have read Ibsen, if only because he sends me back with a new zest to the masters who saw life steadily, and saw it whole. The sunshine seems brighter than ever, the breeze has quite an unfamiliar freshness, when one emerges from these dark rooms and this close air. There is really something too wilful in the persistency with which Ibsen draws down the blinds and closes the ventilators. Dante, says Petrarch in Landor's *Pentameron* 'had that splenetic temper which seems to grudge brightness to the flames of hell'; and Ibsen, too, is like that—though he finds his hell nearer than Dante did. That his own aim is passionately moral I do not doubt; but wisdom, it seems to me, lies somewhere midway between this determined pessimism and the contrary spirit which is for ever singing, 'God's in his heaven—all's right with the world.' All

is *not* right with the world; but, then, neither is all wrong with the world, as Ibsen would apparently have us believe. In the way he closes and wrestles with life's problems he gives us an impression of huge and savage strength; there is something gigantic about the proportions of the man; but he is a one-eyed giant, a Cyclops of ethics and art.

He seems to me greatest in such a play as 'The Pillars of Society,' because there the theme is a noble one—the ultimate freeing of a human soul from fetters that seemed to have grown incorporate with its essence : and the way in which a frustrated crime—virtually, in morals, though not actually, in realisation, a murder—prepares the way for the criminal's eventual restoration to nobility and to himself, is a conception not more audacious than powerful. The gathering-in of events, their cumulation and convergence towards one supreme height of action and goal of fate, have all the elements of what De Quincey called 'the moral sublime.' And when Ibsen has a truly great idea to work upon, the dignity of his subject keeps his execution at a comparatively high level. In *Hedda Gabler*, on the other hand, where the fundamental conception is altogether worthless, he falls into the crudest

banalities of detail and workmanship. Tesman is quite too absurd, and his abject prostration before Hedda is almost a dramatic incredibility. Ibsen's gifts are great, but a sense of humour and a sense of proportion are not among them. The former would have spared us the infliction of characters that are farcical without being amusing; the latter would have saved the dramatist from the blunder of peopling his stage with mere demon-puppets, extravagant personifications of gratuitous hate and rage.

## MR MEREDITH'S POETRY

EVERY man who cares seriously for literature is born a Meredithian or an anti-Meredithian. Nobody merely 'likes' or 'approves' Mr Meredith's writings: we are all either intensely enamoured of them or distinctly repelled by them. Mr Meredith marks the great line of cleavage in literary taste; and herein consists his one resemblance to several other famous authors with whom he has nothing else in common. Thus, with regard to Shelley, for example, we are either (like Mr Browning and Mr Swinburne) enthusiasts, or else (like Carlyle or Matthew Arnold) depreciators. Men like Shelley or Mr Meredith will not put up with lukewarm affection, neither will they tolerate a languid disparagement. One must love them not at all or all in all. In direct proportion as one's concern with literature is earnest and vital, the work of

these men either engages passionate sympathy or provokes violent antagonism. These writers themselves care for no half-measures. Like the cavalier poet, they seem to say—

> 'Give me more love or more disdain—
> The torrid or the frozen zone.'

With respect to popular appreciation, Mr Meredith dwelt in the frozen zone for the greater part of his literary life; and the time when sudden summer began to flush the glacial waste is well within the memory even of such far from venerable persons as the present writer. The precipitate advent of splendid fame was something like the coming of a New England June, according to Lowell's description—

> 'Long she lies in wait,
> Makes many a feint, peeps forth, draws coyly back,
> Then, from some southern ambush in the sky,
> With one great gush of blossom storms the world.'

Indeed, so ardent has been the glow of his latter-day celebrity, one can imagine it quite possible that Mr Meredith may now and then sigh for a breath of cooler air—for a temperate twilight calm after the gorgeous solstice of his recent renown. It is true, however, that there are still many persons well able to give an account of

themselves and of their opinions who have not joined in what has been wittily called the 'Meredithyramb,' and for the most part their attitude is somewhat after this fashion: they recognise the wealth (they themselves would probably say the heaped and disorderly opulence) of Mr Meredith's ideas, and the tumultuous profusion of his matter; but they are natural aliens to his sphere; it is positively a case of racial antipathy—in a word, he was born George Meredith, and they were born anti-Meredithians, and pre-ordained as such from the beginning of things. Here and there, however, among these persons are some who, like myself, are not exactly 'Meredithyrambic' so far as the novels are concerned, but who are in the habit of keeping Mr Meredith the prose writer and Mr Meredith the poet somewhat separate in their minds. To persons of this temper, certain qualities which they regard as brilliantly irrelevant and splendidly misplaced in the novels are entirely admirable in the poems: and this small sect will welcome with delight the appearance of a reprint which makes *Modern Love* once more easily accessible to the general reader. Perhaps they will regret that *Love in the Valley*—the most purely beautiful of its author's poems, and the

one in which he has not disdained to be pellucidly simple and irresistibly melodious—is not included; for *The Sage Enamoured* may, perhaps, tax their love not unseverely in very much the same way as *The Egoist* might conceivably do. My friend, Mr Dowden, in a number of the *Fortnightly Review*, makes a rather curious defence of that obscurity or difficulty—call it what you will—of which *The Sage Enamoured* certainly provides illustration. Mr Dowden reminds his readers that in the last century Gray, who seems to us transparency itself, was commonly considered to be obscure; and he hints that Mr Meredith's intellectual sinuosities, his mind's

> 'intertwisted fibres serpentine,
> Upcoiling and inveterately convolved,'

may, to the eye of posterity, purged by the euphrasy and rue of transcendent culture, be as plain as is any pikestaff. Now, I do not think Mr Dowden's analogy will bear examination. The last century had about the narrowest standard of lucidity that has ever existed. That century was extravagantly and notoriously enamoured of mere clearness, and found unintelligible a great deal of the poetry which the

seventeenth and the sixteenth centuries could understand. But our own age is not marked by this exaggerated passion for mere transpicuity. On the contrary, such tolerance of obscurity and vagueness has never before been witnessed. Browning is the most obvious illustration. Had Browning's poetry appeared in any other critical age than our own the best-accredited judges would have said, 'This writer has not mastered the elementary art of making his meaning plain; he expects *us* to disentangle the threads which he himself declines to take the trouble of unravelling for us'—but our contemporaries patiently plod their way through jungles of contorted and tormented language, and seem rather to enjoy the exercise. An inclination to be distrustful of writing which the author has been at pains to clarify (I say 'at pains,' because it is always easier to be obscure and confused than transparent and simple) is rather the rule nowadays, and it is far more probable that the twentieth century will see a reaction in favour of something like eighteenth-century straightforwardness than an increased lenience towards opacity of thought or tortuosity of style. For these reasons I cannot but believe that *The Sage Enamoured and the Honest*

*Lady* will not stand the test of time so well as the equally subtle and infinitely more vivid, dramatic, and moving verse of *Modern Love*. This latter is truly a great poem. It is a leaf torn out of the book of life, and dripping with life's red reality. If in this wonderful series of so-called sonnets Mr Meredith is ever transiently incoherent, the incoherence is no mere verbal obscurity, no surface-vice of manner, but the thick utterance of tumultuary feeling. For the most part, indeed, the style is admirable for its precision of clear-cut outline, despite the complexity of emotions which chase and cross one another, and of passions which interact and intervolve. But *Modern Love*, fortunately, is no new addition to the glories of English literature, and there is, perhaps, a certain impertinence in writing about a classic work like this in the tone of a reviewer appraising a new and untried performance. One's excuse is that the poem has been for a good while past out of reach of the regular book-buying public, and in consenting to the present reprint Mr Meredith makes a concession for which all lovers of what is at once deep and high in poetry will be grateful. Those who look upon verse as an elegant recreation may be warned off at once To read *Modern*

*Love* is not exactly to 'follow the delightful Muse'; the theme is painful, not delightful at all; but it is the mysterious province of tragic art to distil from moral pain æsthetic pleasure; and Mr Meredith's art, as a poet, is above all else tragic. He deals with Life—

> 'And Life, some think, is worthy of the Muse.'

It is no fault of his, any more than of Shakespeare's or Dante's, if life is not all an affair of the nightingale and the rose.

## DR JOHNSON ON MODERN POETRY

*An Interview in the Eylsian Fields. A.D.* 1900

INTERVIEWER. What a pleasant place of meeting! I think I have never known the asphodel more abundant, the amaranth more fragrant, than just here.

JOHNSON. The place, sir, is well enough.

INT. What is the building in the grove yonder? It looks like a toy temple.

JOHNSON. My dwelling, sir. It is in the Ionic taste, but I have caused it to be surrounded by a little garden-plot, into which the entrance is by a wicket-gate like that of Bolt Court in my time. Will you do my house the honour of a more immediate inspection?

(*They pass through the inclosure into the house.*)

INT. Quite an ideal residence for a solitary—and a sage.

JOHNSON. Yet, sir, when I first came here, in 1784, I thought I should have died a second time, of very *ennui*.

INT. Ah, you found it dull. No Literary Club, no reunions at the Turk's Head, no Streatham, no—

JOHNSON. Streatham I had already taken leave of, a year before; with gratitude for past mercies there enjoyed, and with a sober resignation to their relinquishment.

INT. But you missed the society of London.

JOHNSON. Sir, I sighed for the agreeable vanities that mitigate the severity of existence. Seldom, since the love-passages of my Lichfield days, had I discovered such a propensity to suspiration.

(*Here Dr Johnson appears to lapse into a tender reverie.*)

INT. (*after a pause*).—But you must have found some of your old friends here before you, on your arrival in this underworld—you can scarcely have been altogether without congenial fellowship. Goldsmith, for instance—

JOHNSON. Dr Goldsmith was indeed here, and had already made him many friends, and some creditors; but Elysium is wide, and we did not

instantly find each other. In process, of time, however, Langton and Beauclerk, and Burke and Sir Joshua, one by one, dropped in—

INT. And you found your old circle restored to you; including, of course, Boswell.

JOHNSON. Including, as you say, Mr Boswell; though you are to understand there hath arisen betwixt Mr Boswell and me—I would be loth to say an estrangement, but just that shade of coolness which I observe to be far from uncommon in the posthumous intercourse of authors with their biographers.

INT. I have noticed the same thing. Carlyle and Mr Froude . . . but surely, Dr Johnson, you can have little serious cause to resent Boswell's treatment of you. His book is certainly written in a spirit of profound veneration for its hero; in fact, it has endeared you to thousands.

JOHNSON. Sir, I divine your drift. You would say, did not your politeness restrain you, that Mr Boswell has conferred upon my fame the perpetuity which my own writings would have failed to ensure. I do not thank him for such a boon. It was scarcely my ambition to survive by proxy, and achieve a sort of vicarious immortality.

INT. But Boswell has preserved for all time

one side of your genius which, otherwise, posterity would have had no express record of. We owe it to him that innumerable familiar conversations, in which your various powers, permit me to say, are shown perhaps more racily than in your writings, have been rescued from an oblivion which would have been the misfortune of the world.

JOHNSON. Yes, sir. Thanks to Mr Boswell, every light word, every ill-considered expression, which the vehemence of debate may have seduced me into uttering, is remembered to my prejudice, whilst the writings upon which I lavished the best powers of my mind and the ripest fruits of my study are forgotten.

INT. (*aside.*) How curious! Johnson the great writer jealous of Johnson the wonderful talker. (*Aloud.*) But can it be said that your works are forgotten? In my own time I recollect several able critics, at Matthew Arnold's instance, getting up a kind of revival of interest in them.

JOHNSON. Nay, sir, forbear me your revivals! Fame is indeed well enough; but when once a man is in the way of feeling comfortably settled in oblivion, he would rather be let alone.

INT. (*aside.*) Hard to please, either way.

JOHNSON. I understand, indeed, that your revivalists have been busy in other directions. They have recalled to a ghastly simulation of life the most barbarous of the justly forgotten playwrights. I do not desire resurrection in such company. No, sir, I would rather slumber with Addison and Temple than be awake with Webster and Ford. And if in truth I have had my day, it ill becomes me to murmur at the approach of twilight. By-the-bye, I have heard that one of the first persons to deal a blow at my authority as a critic was a poet—one Wordsworth, of whom you may have heard.

INT. I have heard of him.

JOHNSON. A poet who, before the society of wits and scholars, preferred that of clowns and hinds, and who found the cultivated shores of Thames less to his liking than the savage wilds of Westmoreland, where man is only less rude and forbidding than Nature. I have looked into the writings of this gentleman, and of other poets his contemporaries, and it seems to me that their range is as narrow as their subjects are unedifying. Shakespeare pourtrayed man in various action; Mr Pope exhibited man in elegant society; but your modern poet can show nothing but man in presence of some huge

comfortless mountain or inhospitable seashore. Your modern poet would appear to be a taciturn and unsocial person, who never opens his mouth until he comes where there are none but ravens and seamews to listen. I have sometimes wondered whether the art of conversation, as understood by my contemporaries, hath since my time perished altogether from amongst living men.

INT. The generation following your own produced at least one marvellous talker in the person of S. T. Coleridge. But monologue, rather than conversation, was his *forte*. In my own time, Carlyle had the repute of a conversational gladiator. His prowess had some features in common with your own.

JOHNSON. Pray, sir, what were those?

INT. (*hesitating*) Well, something of the *trampling* style which Boswell has taught us to associate with your great powers of argument. A freedom from any excessive tenderness for weaker people's feelings.

JOHNSON. Sir! what stuff is this? I will have you to know you take too much upon you. Let me tell you I was ever the gentlest of disputants, the mildest-mannered of controvertists. Are you here to brow-beat and bully me? I'll none

of your bluster. You talk no better than a coxcomb, sir.

INT. I only spoke of the impression conveyed by Boswell. If that impression is a false one, I submit that he is to blame, not I.

JOHNSON. In that sense I accept your explanation, sir. Indeed, you yourself cannot but perceive how wide of the truth were any attempt to represent me as overbearing or irascible in conversation.

INT. I look upon you, Dr Johnson, as courtesy embodied.

JOHNSON (*smiling complacently*) Sir, I have the more pleasure in the compliment you make me, as I am not without a modest consciousness of meriting it.

INT. We were speaking just now of poets, considered from a social point of view. I need hardly remind the author of the *Lives* that Dryden was considered sluggish and Pope insignificant as talkers, and that Addison contrasted his own colloquial unreadiness with his literary facility by saying that he could draw a bill for a thousand pounds though he had not sixpence in his pocket. I don't fancy there can be much evidence for a theory of the decay of conversation as an art. Wordsworth himself,

not the most sociable of men certainly, is credited with having possessed great conversational power. I daresay it was not readily called into play, and I should think there may have been something a little set and formal in his manner; he would hold forth rather than talk, perhaps. In my own experience, Rossetti was an admirable talker, when anything roused his interest.

JOHNSON. Who, sir?

INT. Our great modern poet, Dante Rossetti.

JOHNSON. An Italian author?

INT. No. He came of an Italian family; but as a poet, England has the honour to claim him for her own.

JOHNSON. Did he, too, spend his time celebrating nameless rivulets, and paying servile court to a mob of outlandish mountains?

INT. On the contrary, that passion for natural scenery, which you regard as playing a disproportionate part in modern poetry was, perhaps, even abnormally and strangely undeveloped in him. He lived on Thames' side by inclination as much as from convenience. He, at least, was no Roman preferring Dacia.

JOHNSON. A man of sense, I warrant you. What was his principal work in literature?

INT. Taking it all in all, I should say that his most precious and characteristic achievement is the sequence of poems comprised under the general title of *The House of Life*.

JOHNSON. Sir, your account of this gentleman engages my curiosity. A modern poet who was not the abject slave of nature; who had sufficient judgment to live among men, rather than among sheep, and who selected his themes, as the title of his masterpiece appears to indicate, from amongst the familiar scenes of that great human drama whose stage is London and its audience the world—such a poet, whether his style copies the energy of Dryden, the pointedness of Pope, or the smoothness of Waller, may count, sir, upon my favourable attention. Where can I obtain his works? Are they reprinted in this world of shades?

INT. (*looking round the room*) Why, you have them on your shelves, among a quantity of other nineteenth century poetry. Here are the volumes: *Poems*, D. G. Rossetti; *Ballads and Sonnets*, D. G. Rossetti.

JOHNSON (*with a disappointed air*). Then I have read his verses. I thought, sir, you had meant some other author. Rossetti—h'm—I had forgotten the name. Sir, let us talk of

something else. Sir, your times, and the age preceding yours, were remarkable for an abundance of ill-ordered talents, but I cannot allow you to have produced a single poet the equal of Pope, whether in the variety and justness of his observations upon life or in the harmony of his numbers. As commentators upon life, your poets are nothing. They themselves for the most part seem to have had but little relish of existence, but a feeble gust of living, to judge from the lachrymosities which they void so copiously. Then, too, not a few of the most famous among them quitted life early, and had lived out of the world whilst they were yet of the world. Keats, Shelley——

INT. Shelley died young, but he had lived a great deal in his thirty years.

JOHNSON. Yet, sir, he appears to know nothing of men. What men has he painted? Alastor is a shade. Cenci is a monster. Neither of them is a man. Julian and Maddalo—though the one, it is said, is to be understood of himself, and the other of the Lord Byron—appear scarce more alive and substantial; they pass dreamily before us, emitting a thin, desultory current of would-be-philosophical talk, which tends we do not well see whither; which at last stagnates

in some speculative blind alley. The remaining persons of his poems, for the most part, know not what they would be at.

INT. Shelley was better at the superhuman than the human. If that is a fault, it is one he shares with Milton. You will hardly deny that his Prometheus is a sublime figure.

JOHNSON. I do not deny to his Prometheus a certain sublimity. But, so insubstantial are the moral fundaments of the conception, there results from it, as it were, an ineffectual sublimity and barren grandeur only. Although Prometheus is supposed the champion of the human race, we do not well perceive how his sufferings and the fate of mankind are related. Imagination is willing to do its part, but it asks some aid from reason and commonsense. Hence, although the tortured Titan's transcendent endurance may awe, it can scarcely concern us. And your analogy of Shelley and Milton will not hold. Milton's great superhuman personages are all reared upon a solid bottom of human nature. No, sir; Mr Shelley can talk fluently enough about man, but men he seems not to have encountered. There is more knowledge of the stuff of human nature in any dozen lines of one of Pope's epistles than in all Shelley ever

writ. And surely no man could be so infatuate as that he should question the superiority of Pope's versification. Your moderns take to themselves vast credit for mere diversity of numbers. Any man, by simply willing it, can bring himself to write in a variety of measures. But an assured perfection in one is better than an empirical facility in a thousand.

INT. The whole theory of versification has been so revolutionised since your time, that I doubt if you and I could find any common ground upon which to discuss the subject without mutual misapprehension. Ideals of excellence have been reversed. In the religion of the lyre, your God has become our Devil. But as to the other matter in which you claim superiority for the eighteenth century, it seems to me, and it seemed to the majority of my contemporaries, that Pope was less the poet of human nature than of a phase of society, less of man than of manners.

JOHNSON. Nay, sir, what sophistical distinction is here? You are to consider, there is no such thing apprehensible by us as naked human nature. Human nature can only be known to us under the local and temporal conditions through which it discloses itself. Would you

have Pope paint you his Atticus, and Bufo, and Sporus, and Atossa, minus the conditions under which alone these persons are cognisable? You might as well have asked Sir Joshua to paint his sitters without their clothes.

INT. But there is such a thing in literature as painting the clothes very conscientiously, and leaving out the man. I don't say Pope did that, but I do say that in reading him we feel rather oppressed by a predominance of social accidents over human essentials—much more so, for instance, than we feel in reading Shakespeare. I admit, however, that in the failure to give classical literary form to the presentation of social life is the vulnerable side of modern poetry. But I won't admit that Pope was the last poet who understood human nature. There lived, in my own time, Robert Browning.

JOHNSON. I have his works. The terrors of his style were great, but he that valiantly faced and overcame them had his reward. Yes, sir, Browning could read men. The pity is, men cannot read Browning. But we were speaking of Shelley. I hold him, in a large measure, responsible for that prevalence of the loosely thought and the inexactly said which deforms so much of your modern poetry. His friend, Mr

Keats, though not a scholar, had far more of the instinct of scholarship in the use of words, as well as of the instinct of exactness in the mention of things. I take down a volume of Shelley, and I open it, let us say, at his last completed performance, *Hellas*. All that is remembered of this drama is the choruses, in which some of your critics profess to find the summit of his lyrical accomplishment. The poet is speaking of Jesus Christ.

> 'A mortal shape to Him
> Was like the vapour dim
> Which the orient planet animates with light.'

Now that is excellent; but mark you what comes after.

> 'Hell, sin, and slavery came,
> Like bloodhounds mild and tame,
> Nor preyed until their Lord had taken flight.'

Here, you are to observe, the poet brings arbitrarily together an allegorical trinity whose persons cannot properly be ranked in the same plane of category: hell, a place or state; sin, an act or propensity; slavery, an institution. It is somewhat as if one should say, heaven, joy, and marriage rose.

'Hell, sin, and slavery came
Like bloodhounds mild and tame
Nor preyed, etc.'

Bloodhounds, like other dogs of chase, do not prey, but hunt.

'Nor preyed until their Lord had taken flight.'

Where is the pertinence of máking Christ the lord of slavery? The word lord has here no relevancy, except in the general sense whereby we speak of Christ as lord of all things. It were as apposite to style him the lord of polygamy. And lastly, we have the gross impropriety, in this association, of the phrase 'taken flight.' In fine, within the compass of about twenty syllables, your póet stands convicted of four lapses into the flagrantly solecistical. Now, sir, in my time to have written like this would have been to incur the censure of not knowing how to write at all. Yet your poets look down with disdain, or with the civil insolence of patronage, upon an age before whose rigorous modes of criticism they could not have stood for a moment.

INT. I think it is you yourself who somewhere speak with a proper contempt of the sort of criticism which consists in 'the rude detection of

faults which perhaps the censor was not able to have committed.'

JOHNSON. Yes, sir; but the faults I have been exposing are not such as there is needed genius to commit. Rather they are such as true genius has the felicity to escape. For genius is itself a kind of felicity—a charmed life—a magical exemption from perils to which mediocrity is obnoxious. The faults I have been exposing are such as are sown broadcast over some of the most belauded verse of your century.

INT. A certain negligence and laxity of self-criticism was common enough in Shelley and Byron, and other poets of that period. But we have changed all that since their time. Tennyson and Rossetti were most fastidious judges of themselves. They probably never published a stanza or a line until they had tested it with a severity which few mere critics are capable of exercising.

JOHNSON. Tennyson was indeed a master who had the art of precision in luxuriance. I could wish his thoughts were no less invariably exact than his expression. In the imagery of his justly famous elegiac poem I find an occasional deficience of perspicuity; the thoughts are too apt to be pursued to their remotest ramifications.

I stick fast in their mazy turns and windings. (*After a pause.*) I become entoiled in their labyrinthine circumplications and multiflexuous anfractuosities.

INT. (*aside.*) The old fellow's mannerisms seem to grow upon him.

JOHNSON. As to Rossetti, though I remember the having read him, I found in him but little that pleased.

INT. He certainly had what you praise Tennyson for—precision in luxuriance. For romantic richness of colour I believe him to be without an equal, and along with this gorgeous affluence he has the strictest verbal compression. He valued himself upon his turn for condensation —rightly, I think.

*Here Dr Johnson takes down from his shelves Rossetti's Poems, opens at random, and reads aloud as follows:—*

'Like labour-laden moonclouds faint to flee
From winds that sweep the winter-bitten wold—
Like multiform circumfluence manifold
Of night's flood-tide—like terrors that agree
Of hoarse-tongued fire and inarticulate sea—
Even such, within some glass dimmed by our breath,
Our hearts discern wild images of death,
Shadows and shoals that edge eternity.
Howbeit athwart Death's imminent shade doth soar
One Power, than flow of stream or flight of dove

Sweeter to glide around, to brood above.
Tell me, my heart, what angel-greeted door
Or threshold of wing-winnowed threshing-floor
Hath guest fire-fledged as thine, whose lord is Love?'

Sir, I know not but you are in the right to claim for Rossetti's verse the merit of condensation. Here is truly a greater body of nonsense condensed within fourteen lines than I had believed fourteen lines to be capacious of. Now, sir, I invite you to consider with me this sonnet line by line. Let us begin at the beginning. Clouds are often enough spoken of as *labouring*: and clouds may also, with permissible looseness, be said to be *laden*, as with rain; but how can they be *labour-laden*, that is, laden with labour? And what is a mooncloud? And what does *faint to flee* mean? *Circumfluence of night's flood-tide* is inoffensive, but *multiform* and *manifold* have here little, if any, meaning, and of use none whatever, save to swell out a line. In *terrors that agree of hoarse-tongued fire and inarticulate sea*, I know not what *agreement* is to be understood. In line seven, the words *within some glass dimmed by our breath* can only be held to verge towards a possible meaning by being charitably supposed figurative; but figurative of what does not appear. *Shadows and shoals* are brought together

for no better reason than their initial alliteration; a reason, however, which appears to have much weight with some of your modern poets. *Howbeit* is an odd and uncouth word, by which good taste is revolted. Expletives like *doth* were in my time, by common consent of the judicious, rejected as awkward encumbrances, and I am sorry to see them come in after our diction had been supposed purged of them. In lines nine to eleven, a Power sweeter to glide around and to brood above than either the flow of a stream or the flight of a dove is, soars against the imminent shade of death. It were vain to discuss these lines in hope to come at their meaning. They have none. The three lines which follow, and in which we meet with the guest of the threshold of a threshing-floor, are equally vacant of import. Pope speaks of writers who 'blunder round about a meaning.' To blunder round about a meaning is bad enough, but it at least implies a meaning round about which the writer blunders; and when we see an author in manifest labour and travail with a thought, compassion for his pangs disposes us to assist at the delivery. We are willing to believe that the value of the thought may compensate its difficult bringing forth. But this is not Rossetti's plight. It is

not that he is here painfully struggling to present us with a thought. He had no thought to present. Your contemporaries, I presume, called this poetry. Mine would have called it gibberish.

INT. I think you have not lit upon a good example of Rossetti's sonnets. This one does seem open to a certain kind of criticism. But others, you will find, contain poetry which is above all profanation of criticism and beyond all flight of praise; touches which only the very greatest poets can rival—Homer, Dante, Villon, Swi—

JOHNSON. Well, sir, let's have them. Let's have the touches.

INT. Is not the accent, the manner, of the highest poets in this? I have quoted it repeatedly in critical articles as an instance of supreme attainment in style.

> 'The sunrise blooms and withers on the hill
> Like any hill-flower, and the noblest troth
> Dies here to dust.'

JOHNSON. But why has he made a sunrise to wither? The progress of the sun towards its meridian is an ascent and expansion. There is no propriety in associating with it images of

decadence and dissolution. Elsewhere I observe he speaks of a curse lying furled. When I find your poetry scattered thick with such expressions as these, I can but conclude you had arrived at such a pass as that a phrase, if proper, seemed dull. The measure of its power to please you was the extent of its departure from rectitude.

INT. Does not style, after, all, depend for its impressiveness upon some subtle exaggeration, or perhaps distortion? Take, for example, such a line as Keats's

'There is a budding morrow in midnight,'

which Rossetti thought the finest single line of English poetry. Does it not rely for its effect upon—

JOHNSON. In the name of nonsense, what 'effect,' sir? Why, sir, the man might as well have said 'There is a blossoming gooseberry bush in mid-winter.'

INT. But has a gooseberry bush blossoms?

JOHNSON. Has a morrow buds? I perceive Mr Rossetti has a sonnet upon Mr Keats.

(*reads*)

'The weltering London ways, where children weep
And girls whom none call maidens laugh—strange road,
Miring his outward steps who inly trode
The bright Castalian brink and Latmos' steep.'

What perversity is here! Poetry should present to us what is characteristic and essential in objects, but here is a poet in whose vision of city life the tears of children and gaiety of courtezans occupy the foremost place.

'Even such his life's cross-paths; till deathly deep
He toiled through sands of Lethe, and long pain,
Weary with labour spurned and love found vain,
In dead Rome's sheltering shadow wrapped his sleep.'

'Deathly deep' is a vile phrase, and the allusion to Lethe I do not understand, but what was it that 'wrapped his sleep'? Was it 'pain'? And was it 'pain' that was 'Weary with labour spurned and love found vain'? Here truly is neither sense nor grammar. Thenceforward the piece goes on in the fantastic manner of your day:

'O pang-dowered poet, whose reverberant lips
And heart-strung lyre awoke the moon's eclipse,'

and so forth. A poet who was dowered with pangs, and whose lips reverberated — a lyre which was heart-strung, and which awoke the moon's eclipse—it is hard to say whether the poet or his lyre were the more remarkable.

INT. I think the two sonnets you have quoted must have been an early and a late example of

his art; neither of them contains any of those splendid single lines which light up so many of his sonnets with a kind of sudden coruscation. I remember an admirable critic in one of the magazines pointing out the frequency with which Rossetti would end a sonnet with some line of great sonority and resonance, like

'The wind of death's imperishable wing,'

or

'Sleepless with cold commemorative eyes,' etc.,

JOHNSON Nay, sir, if you come to talk of eminent single lines, Pope is all starred and blazing with them. If you have read him diligently, and have a moderately tenacious memory, you may at any moment call them up by the score. Thus he has, to 'Break a butterfly upon a wheel'; to 'Wonder with a foolish face of praise'; to 'Marry discord in a noble wife'; to 'Keep awhile one parent from the skies'; to 'Snatch a grace beyond the reach of art'; to 'Make each day a critic on the last'; to 'Waft a sigh from Indus to the Pole'; to 'Help me through this long disease, my life'; to 'Do good by stealth and blush to find it fame'; to 'Grieve for an hour, perhaps, then mourn a year'; to 'Die of a rose in aromatic pain'; to 'Damn with faint praise, assent with civil leer';

'And wretches hang, that jurymen may dine,' 'And mistress of herself, though china fall,' 'The mob of gentlemen who wrote with ease,' 'A youth of frolics, an old age of cards,' 'I lisped in numbers, for the numbers came,' 'As all looks yellow to the jaundiced eye,' 'Stretched on the rack of a too easy chair,' and so on, to infinity. For the most part, as you perceive, these lines may not only be detached without harm to the integrity of the sense, but they are self-explanatory no less than self-continent. I say, for the most part, they are so. You might select from the same poet other lines as rich in various merit as these, to be ranged under certain heads, as, for example:

*Forms of Government.*
'Whate'er is best administered is best.'

*Ambition.*
'The glorious fault of angels and of gods.'

*Dull Poets.*
'Sleepless themselves, to give their readers sleep.'

*Admiration of Archaic Authors.*
'It is the rust we value, not the gold.'

*Man.*
'The glory, jest, and riddle of the world.'

Besides these he has a multitude of single lines perhaps of no very eminent literary merit, but withal having somewhat that has earned for them the distinction of proverbial currency: such as, 'A little learning is a dangerous thing,' 'Who shall decide when doctors disagree?' 'Man never is, but always to be blest,' 'The Feast of Reason and the Flow of Soul,' 'Thou wert my guide, philosopher, and friend,' 'The proper study of mankind is man,' 'An honest man's the noblest work of God,' and many more such. I would have you also to observe that in what little of erotic poetry Pope essayed, he discovers an equal gift of expressing in single lines the most impassioned and tumultuary states of feeling; as in *Eloisa to Abelard*—

'Oppose thyself to heaven; dispute my heart!'

And—

'All my loose soul unbounded springs to thee.'

These lines, sir, are more than rhetorical; they are nobly passionate and dramatic. I suppose it is a small merit in the eyes of your generation that these lines do not purchase their force or felicity by extravagance of epithet or intemperance of phrase.

INT. Is it not possible to place too high a value on mere negative virtues—mere freedom from literary vice? If I may add another to your list of Pope's memorable single lines, I would remind you that 'Great wits sometimes may gloriously offend.' But on the score of classic severity, which of your poets of the Boileau-Pope school can show as pure a diction as Matthew Arnold's? I myself like splendour and sumptuousness for their own sake, and don't object to a style that is 'stiff with gorgeous embroidery'; but if purity of design and chaste frugality of decoration make a classic, I confess Pope seems to me merely a magnificent barbarian beside such a poet as Matthew Arnold. Have you read his verse, Dr Johnson?

JOHNSON. I have; and it is among the most excellent which your age produced. I lament that there is in it much that is alien to my apprehension—much that reflects, apparently, a mental world of which I have no private report; but he has many pages where I encounter no such impediment to understanding, and when I come to write his memoir in the continuation which I am preparing of my *Lives of the Poets*, you shall not need to reproach me with parsimony of praise. [*Takes up his pen, writes*

*fluently, and slowly declaims whilst writing.*] His sonnets almost persuade me to a reluctant respect for that literary form. His elegiac poem of *Thyrsis*, if not the noblest, is the most perfect threnody in our language. Undeformed by the juxtaposition of irreconcilables, the jostling of Saint Peter and Jove, which makes Gothic the grace and barbaric the splendour of *Lycidas*; unvexed by the hostilities and resentments which distort the beauty and interrupt the harmony of *Adonais*; it borrows just so much of classic costume, it employs just so much of antique allusion, as dignify without encumbering, and, without disguising, adorn; and it preserves the accents of grief unsilenced by the chords of poesy, the chords of poesy unjarred by the accents of grief.

THE END